Interviews With A Tactician

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Summary: In which Robin decides to conduct interviews with existing and potential Shepherds to ensure their loyalty and commitment to the cause (and some other details). What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter 1: Frederick

(What's the proper etiquette for this stuff, anyways? Well, start at the top, I guess.) Oh, hey, hi! Glad you came. Welcome! This idea came to me when playing the game, or, more specifically, when recruiting different Shepherds. I mean, you as the player know that they're good guys, but Chrom talking to some of them and then being all "you look alright, welcome to the Shepherds!" no questions asked was a bit funny. You'd think the guy would take some precautions, or something. So that's where this came from. Enjoy.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. The times weren't so desperate yet, but they were getting there. Bandit raids were increasing and the Plegian king was clearly planning something. Hell, he was sending his bandits to raid Ylisse just for shits and giggles. In such troubling times, the state would usually put its army on high alert. However, Ylisse's pacifist Exalt demobilized the country's army save for a small group calling itself the Shepherds. Tough as they were, they were still outnumbered by the Plegians. The Shepherds needed more recruits to help defend the country and keep the peace. Yet, despite the coming storm on the horizon, no one in Ylisse thought that it was important to maybe start looking for recruits to increase the Shepherds' manpower and vet said recruits to ensure no spies got into their ranks. That is, until now.

Robin wasn't entirely sure what happened or how he got where he was. There was Chrom. Robin was grateful to his newfound friend, he really was. But he thought that Chrom was too trusting for his own good. Robin was just a man who happened to have some tactical skill lying face down in the middle of some field. Clearly, the only right answer was to make him the head tactician of your country's only fighting force. Robin was also apparently the only one qualified and capable of scouting for, and vetting potential new Shepherds. It's just a good thing that Robin was who he said he was, and not a spy, or an assassin, or some sort of ancient malevolent entity hell-bent on destroying the world…or something.

All of these thoughts raced through Robin's head…then promptly left once he was led into his office. His. Office. He had his own office! It came with books, a desk and everything! Robin couldn't remember being this excited in his entire life (that wasn't really saying much, but hey. New office). So, after settling in (read: sitting at the desk), Robin decided that he would get to work interviewing the Shepherds. And the first one up was…

"So, Frederick, was it?"

The knight glared. "Robin, I know you know very well who I am."

"Yes, I know who you are. And I know that you know that I know who you are. The name check is just a formality."

Frederick sighed. "Why did you call me down here?"

"A good question! As you know, Chrom made me the official tactician of the Shepherds. He has also charged me with interviewing and recruiting new members. While I'm at it, I'd figured that I would also interview existing Shepherds and see if there are any spies amongst our ranks. It's also a great way to get to know everyone, don't you think?"

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. The mere thought of there being spies among the Shepherds is –"

"See, you know that, but I don't know that. For all I know, they could be very dedicated spies and actors. Maybe even *you* could be a spy!"

Frederick didn't dignify the accusation with a response.

"Aw, don't be like that, Fredericson! Think of this as a...a job interview and a team building exercise all in one. It'll give me the chance to assess the abilities of the Shepherds as well as getting to know them better. And you're the first one that I called! Doesn't that make you feel special? Now let's get started. Convince me that you're not a spy and that I shouldn't fire you."

"Firstly, please do not call me by that ridiculous name. Secondly, milord Chrom may have made you our tactician, but that doesn't give you the authority of firing anyone. And third-"

"Oh, but I think it does," said Robin as he reached into his coat and pulled out a piece of paper. "BEHOLD!"

Frederick blinked. "…A shopping list?"

"That's right! A-wait, what?" Robin looked at the piece of paper in his hand. "Oh. Huh. How did that get here? Hold on..." He then proceeded to rummage through his coat pockets, taking out various pieces of paper, tomes, daggers and other

assorted trinkets.

All the while, Frederick sat in a chair in front of the desk, watching the pile of things growing larger and wondering how the tactician managed to fit everything in his coat.

After a few minutes of fumbling, Robin finally found what he was looking for. "Ah ha! Found you! Read it and weep Frederick!"

The knight read the document shoved in front of his face.

"This is…a decree by lord Chrom. It officially appoints you as our tactician."

"Yes. It is and it does. It's all official too, with the royal seal and everything. See it? See it? It's right there. Anyways, as your official tactician, this decree gives me the authority to 'take any and all actions to ensure the integrity and combat readiness of the Shepherds', and a bunch of other things."

Frederick paled. "I…suppose it does."

"So! I guess that gives me the authority to do preeeetty much whatever I want, including firing you. But only for the greater good of the Shepherds. Now come on Freds, convince me not to fire you. What makes you an essential part of the Shepherds? Tell me all about yourself and your skills." Robin put on a bright, innocent smile and stared expectantly at Frederick.

The knight sighed. He never doubted his lord's decisions, but appointing Robin as the official tactician and giving him free reign over the Shepherds was highly questionable…as was Robin's state of mind. However, as a knight, it wasn't his duty to question Chrom's judgment.

"Very well. As you know, I am an experienced knight of Ylisse and have been with the Shepherds for years."

"Uh-huh."

"I have served in the Ylissean army and seen much action in the previous war against Plegia."

"Uh-huh."

"I have also taken it upon myself to pass on my experiences to the next generation of knights and Shepherds. I constantly train them to be in top physical and mental condition to maximize their combat readiness."

"Uh-huh."

"You don't seem very interested."

"Hm? Oh, no. I'm listening and stuff. It's just…what makes you so special?"

Frederick blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"See, I figure that if I'm going to be conducting interviews for all current and potential Shepherds, I'm going to be hearing a lot of impressive portfolios. I mean, we need the best of the best, right? So everyone who we'll encounter is going to have some kind of awesome long list of accomplishments. In order to distinguish between all of these people, I need some kind of distinguishing factor. Something that makes a person stand out, be it a specific skill, a random quirk or *something* to set them apart from the crowd. So Frederick, what's yours?"

"…You want me to tell you about my quirks?" the knight asked incredulously.

"Or specific skills! Something specific to you or something that only you can do." The tactician replied brightly.

Before Frederick could say anything, Robin's stomach growled.

"Oh hey, sorry about that. Feels like I haven't eaten if forever! Let me just find something to eat here…" Robin reached into his pocket and fished out a fistful of jerky. "Ok, back to the topic at hand, what are your unique traits? What do you do in your spare time? Wait, don't you collect pebbles or something?"

"No. I don't know where you got that ridiculous idea. I simply march ahead and clear a path. In my spare time, I inspect our weapons, train, patrol clean the premises and start fires."

Robin quirked an eyebrow. "You start fires? Gotta say, didn't think you had an arsonist under that stern, gruff exterior."

"You misunderstand Robin, I meant campfires. I start campfires. I find it most relaxing."

Robin sighed. "Oh. That's way less fun. But, I suppose it's something. You know what else is something? This bear jerky. It's really, really good and chewy! You gotta try it." Robin offered Frederick a few pieces of jerky.

"I…think I'll decline" said the knight as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"What? Come on. Don't worry about supplies, I got more where these came from. Now try some! The power of jerky compels you…" replied Robin as he waved the jerky in front of Frederick's face.

"No, thank you."

"Come on."

"No."

"Come oooon."

"No."

"Aw, why not? You allergic to jerky or something?"

"…"

Robin's eyes widened in realization. "Really? Allergic to jerky?"

"Well, not exactly allergic. It's just I've rarely been able to choke down wild game, and bear least of all. For some reason, it upsets my stomach."

"I see…"

"Yes, if there is nothing el-"

"I now believe more than ever that you have to eat this jerky."

For the second time in as many minutes, Frederick wondered whether Robin was truly sane.

"I…don't understand."

"It's simple, really." said Robin matter-of-factly. "The way I see it, there's something big on the horizon. Storm clouds gathering, etc, etc. I predict a war. And you know what happens during times of war? Shortages. Shortages of everything imaginable, including meat. So what happens when we're in the middle of a campaign, short on every kind of meat imaginable and the only thing on the menu is bear. Are you gonna be all 'oh, but I can't eat bear because of my condition wah wah wah'? You know what happens to a soldier when he fights and doesn't eat? He dies, that's what! Are you going to be that soldier Frederick? The one that dies not by enemy action, but because he didn't' man up and change his diet?"

"Robin, while your reasoning is sound, I don't think tha-"

"FREDERICK! Are you a knight of Ylisse?"

"Yes." The knight answered immediately.

"Are you willing to do anything and everything to fulfill your duty as a knight of Ylisse?"

"Yes."

"Are you willing to lay down your life in the name of Ylisse and the Exalt?!"

"Yes!"

"ARE YOU WILLING TO PROVE YOUR LOYALTY TO YOUR EXALT AND YOUR COUNTRY BY EATING THIS JERKY?"

Frederick stood up, grabbed the jerky strips from Robin's hand and stared at them with a fiery expression in his eyes.

"For the Exalt! FOR YLISSE!" He then proceeded to stuff the jerky into his mouth and chew it with frightening abandon.

"…"

"…"

Robin cleared his throat. "So, how do you feel?"

"I…I…" The knight looked uncertain before suddenly covering his mouth with his hand and running out of Robin's office. After a few moments, loud vomiting noises could be heard all along the hallway, punctuated by groans.

"Huh. I guess he wasn't kidding when he said that bear meat upsets his stomach. Well, at least he isn't a spy! Eating bear meat knowing it provokes such a violent reaction. That's what I call dedication!"

Robin sat down and made some notes on his roster. "Hmm, guess I should tell him he's not fired."

More groans and vomiting noises.

"…Eventually."

(Do people even read these?) Well, there you have it. I plan to do these for all the Shepherds. Length will probably vary widely. Side note: I've read a few stories here and there, noticed a few things and came to a conclusion. While I like cool, down to earth Robin and love jerkbag Robin, I think my favorite Robin is when he's weird and somewhat crazy. Very much fun.

So, yes. Thanks for reading. Reviews would be appreciated.

Chapter 2: Lissa

New chapter! New chapter in record time!

In the beginning, there was nothing but darkness. Then, Naga got bored and decided to do something about it. So, she said, "Let there be light!", and there was light.

And the light was good because it contrasted with the darkness. And then she waved her hand, and water appeared out of the ether.

Then, when she snapped her fingers, the blueness of the water separated to fly upwards and become the sky.

And Naga said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.

Then Naga said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so.

The Goddess worked tirelessly to paint her portrait. She crafted the sun, the moon, and the stars. She crafted cycles for them, called them seasons so that there would be equal parts warmth and cold. She created life, from the smallest insects to the birds flying in the sky to the largest animals walking the land. Mighty forests sprang up from the grass and covered vast areas of land, housing many living things in them. And Naga saw that it was good.

While the great Goddess worked, a single man was present to see the creation of life on the planet. Robin was his name, and he watched in wonder as everything was created out of the nothingness of the abyss. He saw how the land materialized under his feet, how the seas and the skies separated to become two separate entities. He saw how the grass, the flowers and the trees sprang out of the desert landscape and bloomed in a few seconds. He saw how Naga created all life on the planet and how all the different creatures appeared and spread across the land. And he saw that it was good.

After the Goddess was done, she blessed all of her creations and went away to rest after a hard day's worth of work. So, Robin was left alone to wander around and admire the wildlife. And admire the wildlife he did. He smelled the flowers, fed the birds and played with bunnies. Soon, he found himself on the outskirts of a forest. Robin was about to go in when he heard growling. Suddenly, a pack of wolves appeared and were slowly heading toward him! Robin was not worried, however, because he was sure he could take on a couple of wolves. So, he confidently reached for his sword and unsheathed…a tree branch. Robin stared dumbly at the "weapon" in his hands for a few seconds. What happened to his sword? Why was he carrying a tree branch? Why where these wolves eyeing him instead of the various other animals around? All these questions raced through Robin's mind before he dismissed them. Well, melee may be out of the question, but at least he still had his trusty spell book! Robin reached into his coat pocket and pulled out…a rock.

This was starting to become frustrating. First his sword gets replaced by a tree branch and now his spell book became a rock! Robin calmed himself and focused. Ok, he's been through worse. A tree branch wasn't the most ideal weapon, but he could still keep the wolves at bay. It wasn't all bad. However, as soon as this thought entered Robin's mind, he heard some moaning and groaning. To his horror, purple smoke accumulated in front of the wolves and Risen began emerging out of it! They were as creepy as he remembered them, being all undead and everything.

By this point, Robin was starting to get nervous. Sure, wolves he could handle, but actual armed Risen who feel no pain? He might as well be dead. The only way he could possibly come out of this alive was if he got incredibly lucky, stuck his tree branch into a Risen's face, hoped that the shock killed it, stole its weapon, picked a god, and prayed. Well, it was a plan. Maybe not the greatest plan in the world but it beat waiting around until he go maimed, killed and devoured (not necessarily in that order).

Robin took a deep breath and was about to execute his ridiculous plan when something else happened: the purple smoke kept on growing until it engulfed both the Risen and the wolves. When it cleared, the Risen were riding wolves that had grown twice their size.

It was at that moment that Robin proverbially shat his pants. There was no way he could've possibly planned for this! First wolves, then Risen, now Risen riding wolves! He was about to try his luck and get the hell out of there when he suddenly found that he couldn't breathe. No matter how hard he struggled, no air came into his lungs. The world was turning black, the wolf riding Risen were approaching. One of them lunged and…

"BWARGH! Wha-?! Risen! Wolves! Risen riding wolves! They'r- GAH!" Robin didn't know what happened, but he found

himself face-first on the floor of his office. "Oww…"

"Hee hee hee hee hee! AAAAH ha ha ha ha! 'BWARGH'?! Oh gods, that was HILARIOUS! Heeeee hee hee hee hee!"

As Robin stood up and rubbed his face, he saw a familiar face hysterically. "Damn it Lissa, what the hell?!" asked the tactician irritably.

"I'm sorry, I tried to resist—I really did. But it was just too perfect! You were sleeping so peacefully and….and…" Lissa burst into another fit of laughter.

Robin grunted. "Well, I should be angry with you, but you actually saved me from a very cruel and unusual dream death. So…thanks, I guess."

"Wow, I didn't think you'd be thanking me after that. Must've been some dream, though. Risen riding wolves?"

"It's not important. Why are you here?"

"Oh, right! I heard from Frederick that you're interviewing all the Shepherds to find their strengths and weaknesses. That and something about spies? So here I am."

"Yes. That's right. I was doing that, wasn't I? Great! Thanks for coming Lissa. This could've started better, but I'm willing to overlook that. Now then." Robin sat down and faced the princess. "I know that you're royalty and all, but I'm going to have to judge everyone by their skills and not their blood. No offense."

Lissa shrugged. "None taken. It's for the best."

"Great. Now, tell me what makes you an integral part of the Shepherds."

"Well, until Maribelle comes back from her estate, I'm your only healer."

Robin blinked. "And…"

"And, I'm the one keeping you alive when you get hurt on the battlefield. I think that's reason enough to keep me on." Lissa said confidently.

Robin didn't look convinced. "I dunno. If we get hurt on the battlefield, we can just drink a potion and continue fighting. No need to run to the tent, or wait for a healer or any of that nonsense."

Lissa blinked. "Did you just say that potions are more effective than healers?"

"I did."

"But that's just stupid!"

"Is it though? Is it?!"

"Yes, it is!"

"Hmph. Convince me otherwise."

"Fine. Healing staves are way more effective than simple potions."

"Concoctions exist. And elixirs heal anything and everything."

"Concoctions aren't as effective as healing staves. Elixirs aren't always available and are pretty expensive."

"Fair point," conceded Robin. "But concoctions are more abundant and more widely available."

"Healers can move around the battlefield tending to the wounded. Once patched up, the soldiers can quickly go and fight." Argued Lissa.

"Why need healers when everyone can have a potion in their pockets?"

"Oh yeah, sure, it's all easy when you have a potion in your pocket. But what happens when you're all stabbed and bloody and lying on the ground? You've used up your last potion but that wasn't enough! Now, without any healers or potions, you're gonna die! What then Robin? Huh? Tell me!"

"Hmm…" Robin thought about it for a moment. "Ok, fine. In the name of efficiency, keeping both potions and healers sounds like the best idea."

"YES!" exclaimed Lissa.

"BUT, I'm still going to need a reason to keep you. I mean, yes you can heal and whatever, but you can't fight! That's a pretty big minus."

"Hey! I heal injuries, not inflict them. And in order for me to properly do my job, I'm going to need a bodyguard to guard my body. Besides, I have a really good reason why you shouldn't kick me out."

"Oh? Do tell."

"See, I may be a healer, but healing staves aren't the only ones that I can use."

"Really?"

"Yep!" Lissa said cheerfully. "There are staves that can increase your resistance to magic, ones to repair your weapons, and most importantly, rescue staves."

"What's so special about rescue staves?" asked Robin.

"Rescue staves are basically portable teleporters. In the hands of a staff user, they're able to teleport anyone right beside them, no matter how far that person may be. I'd say that's quite impressive, wouldn't you?"

Robin remained silent, processing this new information. Portable teleporters? That could drastically change the flow of battle. It was inconvenient that they worked only one way, but with proper staff user placing, the possibilities were limitless! Robin became very giddy thinking of all the uses of the rescue staff.

"Um, Robin? Helloooo?"

Lissa's voice brought him back to the present. "Hmm?"

"You alright? You've been rubbing your hands with a creepy smile on your face for a few minutes now."

"Oh Lissa, I'm more than fine. I'm excited. Very, very excited. This rescue staff news is a game changer! Congratulations, you get to stay with the Shepherds."

"Alright!" Lissa pumped her fist into the air.

"Do you have any rescue staves on you now? Actually, you know what? That's not important, here." Robin reached for the weapons rack and threw Lissa a rescue staff. "I just gotta test this thing. Okay, you stay here. I'm going to run to the other side of the castle and once I'm there, you do your thing and bring me back here. Got it? Great! Get ready."

"Wait, what? Robin, hold on a sec! How am I going to kno-" but it was too late. Robin already ran off, leaving a very confused Lissa behind.

As Robin ran, his mind was still thinking of all the ways he could utilize the rescue staff. He could send in shock troops into the enemy's flanks and immediately rescue staff them away when they would be in danger of being overwhelmed. Teleport reinforcements to areas that are under pressure. Get informants out of enemy territory if they got caught. So many possibilities! Robin was so distracted that he didn't notice the light surrounding him or the increasing feeling of weightlessness. When he finally did notice that something was a bit off, the ground disappeared under his feet. He then fell a few feet and, for the second time that day, fell face first onto the floor.

"Oww, dammit. Again?!" groaned Robin as he got up and rubbed his face. When he looked around, he found that he was back in his office. He also saw Lissa, who was breathing heavily.

"Hey Lissa, what gives? Why'd you bring me back so soon? I was only halfway down the hall."

Instead of answering him, Lissa took her staff and hit him on the head with it.

"Ow! What was that for?!"

"That, was for running away before I was finished explaining how rescue staves worked!" said Lissa irritably.

"You mean there's more?" asked Robin as he was trying to figure out whether his nose became crooked.

"Of course there's more! Now listen up, because I'm only going to say this once: the range of the rescue staff depends on how strong the staff wielder's magic is. The stronger the magic, the further they can reach and rescue. Got it?"

"Of course there's a catch…" muttered Robin. "I'm guessing your magic isn't terribly strong, then?"

"Not particularity," admitted Lissa. "I have been training, but even teleporting you from halfway down the hallway kinda took a lot out of me."

"So you need to strengthen your magic, huh?" Robin thought for a moment. "You know what? I think I may be able to help you with that."

"Oh?"

He looked around shadily before reaching into his coat and taking out a pouch. "Here, this is a bag of, *ahem*, Spirit Dust. It'll help boost your magic strength. Don't ask me how I got it and remember to only use it in small doses, otherwise you'll be tripping balls for the entire day. Don't ask me how I know that, either."

Lissa looked at the bag dubiously. "You sure this will help boost my magic?"

"Guarantee it."

"And it's safe?"

"In small doses."

"I dunno. Is this even legal?"

"Why would I have it if it wasn't?"

Lissa didn't look convinced.

"Look, do you want the bag or not?" asked Robin impatiently.

Lissa thought about it for a moment, then smiled. "Okay! But only because you said it'll help me help Shepherds."

"You bet it will!" Assured Robin. "Now a few notes: you can sniff the power straight up, but I recommend putting small doses into your tea or something. Remember, take a pinch a day and nothing more than that. I cannot emphasize this enough. If you take more than the recommended dose, the aftereffects will be…intense. You'll know it works because you'll feel a tingly sensation in your body. If you follow all these steps, your magic strength will grow exponentially and you'll be able to teleport people from across the country."

"Gee, thanks Robin! I'll get to it right away!" said Lissa excitedly before rushing out of Robin's office.

"I believe in you Lissa! And if anyone asks, you didn't get it from me!" shouted Robin, as he closed the door behind her. He then sat down at his desk and thought. There was no way he could keep this up. He could only supply Lissa with a few pouches before he ran out. And the merchants around were charging exorbitant prices for spirit dust. Damn merchants. Apparently a bunch of people want to get better at being mages. Oh well. Although Lissa will have to get stronger the old fashioned way, hopefully the spirit dust will help increase her range so that she could at least rescue people from the end of the hallway, instead of just halfway. Robin made a few notes on his roster before deciding to lie down. The aftereffects of the rescue staff were starting to make him feel queasy.

Chapter 3: Sully

And we're back with another update! A shorter one this time. What can I say? Some characters give ideas better than others. Enjoy.

Robin was interior decorating. Well, he was thinking of interior decorating. Because, as awesome as his new office was, it was missing a certain something. That…and furniture, decorations, plants, and a great many other things, actually. Robin was still pretty stocked he had his own office, but once the initial excitement subsided, he noticed that it was pretty barebones. The only things he had was an (admittedly pretty nice) desk, two closets, a weapons rack, a few chairs and a carpet. What he did have plenty of was space. Space to fill up with stuff to make his office look totally rad. Maybe a fountain, some marble statues, expensive paintings and exotic plants. Yes, something along those lines.

Robin was busy imagining his dream office and all of its unnecessary decorations when a voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Robin!"

The tactician turned around to see who his new guest was. "Oh, hello…Sully, was it?"

"The one and only. You busy?"

"Not really. What's up?"

The knight approached his desk. "Word on the street is that you're assessing all the Shepherds to see you can best use them in combat. That and some crap about spies, enemies behind the lines or whatever. That right?"

"The word on the street knows what's up. That's quite impressive, considering I interviewed only two people."

Sully laughed. "Yeah, well, after your interview with Frederick, news spread like wildfire. I don't think I've ever seen him so pissed off! I'd watch myself if I were you, Robin. Come next training day, he'll probably try to run you into the ground."

"What? No…He wouldn't do that! Me and the Fred are best bros! I was just testing his endurance, and he passed with flying colors. Granted, that was after a few minutes of vomiting his guts out, but a pass is a pass! Besides, he now has the ability to eat bear meat and *won't* starve out in the field. Everybody wins!"

"Har! You sure are something special, Robin! I don't know if I should be worried or impressed that you're our tactician."

Robin smiled brightly. "What are you talking about? I would never knowingly put any of you in any real danger. I just like to push boundaries. But, everything I do, I do out of love and concern for my fellow Shepherds."

"Well, you done good so far Robin. We all have faith in you."

"Aw, thanks Sully! You're making me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

"Right. Well, let's get back to the reason why I came to see you in the first place."

"Yes! Let's do that. You're here because…?"

"Combat assessment! Dammit Robin, we may all have faith in you, but you sure are flighty."

"It's all part of my charm. But enough of our witty banter. Let's do this." Robin said seriously.

"Yeah. And first things first. Here." Sully reached down and heaved a piled of documents onto Robin's desk.

The tactician paled. "That, uh, sure is a lot of papers, there Sully. Why…?"

"It's for your criminal background check."

"My what now?"

"You know, so you can make sure that none of us are criminals, say who we say we are, loyal to the haildom and all that other crap."

"Oh. Yes. That thing that you said that I totally do. Yes. Thank you. But, why are there so many documents here? I feel like there's enough paper on my desk to cover your entire life, and then some."

"Oh, there's definitely more than that. These documents here detail my life as well as that of my parents, grandparents, great grandparents and others. Birth certificates, citizenship papers, knight exam results, physical assessments and a bunch of other crap. There's enough information here for a couple of generations."

"A couple of gener…wait, WHAT?!" Robin looked at Sully incredulously. "Why would you give me everything that was ever written about your family?! If you wanted me to check your background, wouldn't you just give me stuff relating only to you? This pile is almost as tall as I am!"

Sully simply shrugged. "I didn't know how thorough you wanted to be or how far back to go, so I just brought everything."

Robin groaned. "And knowing me, I'm going to have to go through everything here just because it's all here and…and…"

"Er, Robin? You okay there? If it's too much for ya, I could take these back and-"

"No. No, it's quite alright. Besides, now that I know that there's this giant stack of papers that needs checking, my inner OCD demands that I comb through it all, otherwise I won't sleep."

"Wow. That's some dedication you got there."

"Dedication, obsession, whatever you want to call it, it's a gift and a curse. Now, let's just… push this out of our minds for a second and get down to business. Why don't you take a seat and tell me about your skills and value to the Shepherds."

"Now we're talkin!" Sully sat down. "Well, as you know, I'm a knight. Been training for as long as I can remember. Came from a long lines of knights, which you'll find out when you go through the papers I have ya. Could've sat around in a court and inherited the title of knight, but to hell with that! I wanted to earn it! So I trained, signed up with the Shepherds and trained some more."

"Hmmm. That's quite impressive. Come to think of it, when I look at the training grounds, you're usually the first person that I see. Do you do anything other than train?"

"Yeah. I usually inspect weapons, patrol, check the premises, gather supplies and that sort of thing."

"You don't get pleasure from starting fires of the camp, or other variety, by any chance, do you?"

"What the hell kind of question is that? I gain as much pleasure starting fires as the next guy. It's nothing to get excited about."

"Aw, and here I thought I had a female Frederick."

"What was that?"

"Oh? Nothing, nothing. Anyways, I can't help but notice that you seem to spend a lot of time honing your battle related skills at the expense of your non-battle related skills."

"Yeah, well you can't get to the top without some sacrifices. If being the best knight out there means that I can't cook or clean, then so be it! Can't say I regret how things turned out. Hell, with all the training I did, I'm probably stronger than most men."

Robin raised an eyebrow. "You know, I somehow don't doubt that. But that begs the question: does that extend to the Shepherds?"

Sully thought for a moment. "I suppose. I know I'm already stronger than most of them. Hell, with enough training, I could rise to be top dog."

"Interesting. Let's test that theory!"

"What?"

"I've decided. In order to truly cement your place among the Shepherds, you must defeat all the men in this army in single combat!"

"Earn my place among the Shepherds? Robin, I earned my place as soon as that they accepted me and a proved that I was strong enough to beat down bandits, thieves and all the other scum."

"Yeah, but now you get to prove it even more. Besides, think of this as a step in your path to glorious knighthood. I mean, this army has some of the bestest and toughest men in all of Ylisse. Surely, training and beating them will only improve

your abilities? It'll make you harder, better, faster and stronger!"

Sully considered Robin's words. "You do have a point there. I do train with them pretty often. And they *are* the strongest men in the country…"

"Beating them will only make you stronger," Robin offered helpfully. "Stronger is better, isn't it?"

"Alright! You got yourself a deal!"

"Excellent! I wish you luck in your endeavors. Just report back to me once that's over with and wow me with all that you've learned."

"Hell yeah! But wait, I just come and tell you when I've won? You don't need any proof?"

Robin shrugged. "That won't be necessary. If you lied, I could just ask around and check. But I know you won't lie. You knights have way too much honor and stuff for such dirty tricks."

"You sure got that right. Now, enough chatting. I'm going to start this assignment right now. It'll be the longest training session and the greatest challenge to overcome. Thanks for the idea, Robin. You're alright."

"Aren't I always? Anyway, away you go. I expect you to be the greatest knight in the realm when you come back!"

"You bet your ass!"

With that, Sully left Robin's office, her eyes alight with passion and determination.

"Ah, if it isn't the lovely and magnificent Sully, please allow me to-"

"Perfect timing! Come on Ruffles, we're gonna spar."

"Wait, spar? Now? But I-ow! Milday, I beg you, please don't pull on my arm so! I'm very-"

"Can it, you sissy! Save your complaining for later."

Robin chuckled as the Sully and Virion's voices faded down the hall. He felt bad for Virion and the hell that the archer would have in a few minutes. But then he looked over to the pile of documents Sully had given him and immediately felt bad for himself.

I don't have to go through all of them. I could just check the documents relating to Sully. It'll be easier and take less time! More efficient. Plus, I get to get more done with the free time. All these thoughts raced through Robin's mind as the desperately tried to come up with reasons to not go through all of the papers in the pile. But after a few minutes of hesitating, Robin sighed.

"Who am I kidding? I'm going through all of them no matter how much I don't want to."

So, with another sigh and a heavy heart, he stood on his chair, reached for the top of the pile and started reading.

Chapter 4: Virion

Man, once again, this thing kinda got away from me. Oh well, long chapter ahoy!

"That's quite the bruise you have there, Virion."

The archer chuckled before wincing and putting a bag of ice over his face. "Indeed. It is one of the many scars I bear from my many battles on the field of love. Granted, most aren't serious enough to leave any lasting marks. The worst part of this is that I have a very unbecoming bruise of my noble visage! How am I supposed to woo the ladies of the world with a black eye?"

Robin gave him a blank stare. "…the hell are you talking about?"

"Ah, my young tactician. Still inexperienced in matters of the heart, I see. But you needn't worry. The art of conversing with the finer sex is complicated and requires patience, charm, charisma, good looks and a multitude of other things. It is an art form that takes years to truly hone and perfect. However, you are in luck! I happen to be one who has mastered said art. I am also perfectly willing to impart this, most wisest of wisdoms onto a willing student. A word of caution though: this knowledge that I am about to impart is not for everyone. Any lesser man will crumble under the pressures and expectations. Those with not enough diligence and understanding will forever be doomed to rejection and the occasional slap from the women of the world. Knowing this, are you ready to being your journey and ascend to the ranks of smooth ladies' man?"

Robin blinked uncomprehendingly. "I just commented on your bruise. How did we get from that, to…whatever you're talking about now?"

"Oh, my very unbecoming black eye that stains my otherwise noble face? As I said, another scar earned on the battlefield of love. The lovely and fair Sully was my opponent this time. I must admit, her combat skills are equaled only by the bluntness of her tongue and by her devotion to her training. But all of those qualities maker her all lovelier! Her floating, so much like the butterfly and her stinging, so much like the bee! Although I do wish she would control herself, just a little. The bruise on my face is just the most visible one. After our vigorous sparring session, I felt pain all over my body and in every movement. The injuries I incur when in pursuit of a lovely maiden are not often so physical, or so severe."

Robin sighed and rubbed his temples. "Dear Naga, Sully was totally right. Talking to you is an exhausting experience." He then reached out and drank from his mug.

"Why Robin, how you wound me with those words!" Virion dramatically put a hand over his heart and recoiled in mock hurt. "'And here I thought we were comrades, friends even! Just sitting here and exchanging our life experiences and-"

"I'm going to stop you before you go into another rant about something completely unrelated to the topic at hand. Now, do you know why I called you here? You know what? I'm going to answer for you. I'm currently rooting out any potential spies within the ranks of the Shepherds by interviewing them. That, and assessing their strengths and weaknesses. I'm a very good judge of character, you know. And guess what? You're the first non-Shepherd! I guess that makes you special. Unfortunately, it also makes you the most suspicious."

Virion scoffed. "What? Me, a spy? Why, that's absolutely preposterous! Ridiculous! Absurd!"

"See? That's *exactly* something a spy would say. The extra adjectives don't help your case. If anything, they make you look even more suspicious since you so vehemently deny the accusation. And the only reason you would so vehemently deny the accusations is because the're TRUE!" Robin stared at Virion accusingly.

The archer scoffed again. "Please, my dear Robin. I, Virion, the archerst of archers, am too honest and good looking to be a spy. Look at my noble face and ignore the black eye. Is this the face that you would associate with a lowly spy? I think not."

Robin shrugged. "Hey, I dunno what a spy would look like. A few days' worth of memories doesn't really give me much to go on. Besides, it's not like spies go around being all openly shady with a giant sign saying "I'M A SPY" or something. Because that would make my job way too easy and a lot less fun. But that's beside the point. I expect spies to be able to blend in very well with their surroundings and the people around them. Kinda like chameleons. Well, the good spies anyways. And so far, you could be a very good spy, being all airy and talking like some sort of bard who gets paid by the word. What's up with that, anyways?"

"I do not even know where to begin. Can you be more specific?"

"You know, with the flowery language and whatever? It makes it hard to tell what the hell you're talking about. It also takes you twice as long to finish a sentence. Whereas a normal person says something to get to the point, you decorate your phrases with so many adjectives, superlatives and other unnecessary tidbits that by the time you finish, the other person just looks at you in confusion or annoyance, or they look at the nearest clock wondering when you'll finish. It also makes you sound really pompous and annoying. So I ask again, what's up with that?"

Virion sounded genuinely insulted this time. "Why my good Robin! This is just my natural way of speaking, honed after years of practice to woo the fairer sex. I'll have you know it gives a sense of security to others and works wonders in higher social functions!"

"Somehow, I sincerely doubt that. The only thing it serves is to distract whoever it is you're taking to because they're too busy trying to figure out…what…" Robin's eyes suddenly grew wide with realization. "So that's your game!"

"What? I would very dearly like to know what exactly you think my 'game' is."

"See? You did it again. You could've just ended your sentence after the 'what' but nooo! You had to go on and stretch it out." Robin took another sip out of his mug. "But fine, I'll humor you. Being a spy, your task is to find out vital information and divert attention from yourself. Talking in that superfluous way of yours achieves just that! The moment someone suspects you of anything, all you need to do is talk to them. As they try to figure out what you're saying underneath all of the needless additions in your speech, their attention quickly goes to the task at hand, and distracts them from trying to find out anything about you. Ha! I finally figured you out! You thought you could trick me but you'd have to get up pretty early in the morning to pull one over Robin. Or go to bed really late at night. Or, blast, how did that saying go? Whatever, the point is that I've figured you out!"

"By dear friend Robin, I may be many things, but an enemy agent I am not. Of this, you can be assured."

"Yeah, that your assurances don't really help. I mean, come on, even you have to admit that you're pretty shady. We're fighting some horrible undead things and you just *happen* to appear at that time, trailing on of the Shepherds and just *happen* to offer your assistance for absolutely nothing?"

"I know that I may be hard to believe, but it was just pure coincidence that events unfolded in that fashion. I like to think that the hand of fate may have guided me towards your group so that I could aid you in the struggles ahead. Besides, if we're talking about characters of questionable backgrounds and circumstances, you would arouse the most suspicion out of all of us."

Robin took another sip from his mug and laughed. "I know, right? You couldn't come up with a more suspicious character than me if you tried. I was just some guy lying in the field with no memory, no background and no excuses. Even I wouldn't trust me with that sort of lame excuse. Then BAM! I'm suddenly given the most important position within the Shepherds and put in charge of basically Ylisse's entire military and its most important people. Chrom's just lucky my story was true! If I truly was an enemy agent, everyone here would be dead like, three days ago."

"It does seem awfully convenient," agreed Virion. "However, you seem to be a good man and a good tactician. Chrom's faith in you was not unfounded. Perhaps, given your circumstances, you could also give me the benefit of the doubt?"

Robin paused and thought. After a few minutes, he sighed. "You know, I really *should* be more thorough in my background checking, given my position and all. BUT, you do make a good point. I'm not really one to judge others when I myself have a very flimsy background. So yes, fine. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and allow you to stay with the Shepherds. Be warned though: you'll probably have to pick up the slack if you want to convince us of your loyalty."

"Tis not a problem! I, Virion, shall work tirelessly around camp and to ensure the safety of my fellow Shepherds. By the end of all this, I shall have secured your trust a hundred times over! Tales shall be told for thousands of years hence, of noble Virion's valiant attempts at-"

"Yeah yeah. None of that now. I just said we'll tolerate you. Don't make me regret it."

Virion bowed. "My humblest apologies."

"Thank you." Robin took another sip from his mug. "This brings us to the next point on the agenda. You're an archer, correct?"

"Indeed. The archest of archers, in fact."

"Riiight. Well, while I admit that having someone to take out enemies from afar is quite handy, I question your usefulness when engaging in close combat. Or rather, your lack of usefulness."

"Why Robin, a gifted tactician such as yourself must know that archers are best used from afar. They are not made for close quarters combat."

"Yes, but a good tactician also knows that there are no certainties on the battlefield. You may be nicely tucked away from the action, but enemy reinforcements could spring up right next to you and you'd be dead."

"True. But in this case, it would help if you assigned me a partner. They would fit the role of 'spotter' and 'guard 'at the same time. Helping me spot enemies and protecting me from incoming foes is fitting two roles with one unit, effectiveness at its finest, is it not?"

"Yes, but that would require me to divert a unit I could otherwise use on the front lines. The only reason the Risen aren't chewing on your bones right now is because Sully had to baby you while you shot Risen from the fort. That's all nice and well, but Sully could've also been attacking them instead of playing defense."

"You make fair points Robin." Virion conceded. "However, as of right now, I am the only unit – besides yourself, of course – capable of hitting enemies from a distance. I'm also quite good at it, if I do say so myself. Surely this advantage is enough to counterbalance the disadvantage of using a frontline soldier to guard me?"

"Hmmm…"

"Very well, then allow me to add another point in my favor."

"Oh?"

"Yes. As all archers, I am able to hit the enemy from afar. However, like all archers, I am also very effective at dealing with flying units, be it enemy pegasus knights or wyvern riders. Surely that is reason enough to keep me on?"

Robin looked intently at Virion before bursting into laughter.

The archer was shocked at Robin's reaction. "W-what's so funny?"

"Y-you j-just said…pfft hahaha!"

It took a few minutes before the laughter subsided.

"I'm sorry about that, but man, Virion, you sure can be funny sometimes!"

"I beg your pardon? I fail to see what you find so funny about my proposal."

"Wyvern riders."

"What about them?"

"Wyvern. Riders. WYVERN RIDERS! As in, humans riding fierce, dangerous dragons as simple mounts. That idea is so crazy it's hilarious! I probably wouldn't have believed the pegasus part either were it not for the fact that horses with wings seems plausible. That, and the fact the Ylisse has its own pegasus knight squadron. We even have some of them among the Shepherds! So, yeah. People riding flying horses? Believable. People riding dragons? CRAZY."

"But it's true! I even hear that Plegia has its own wyvern squadron to counter Ylisse's pegasus knights."

"Yeah. Sure. Alright. Tell you what: you show and shoot down a couple of these 'wyvern riders' and I won't look at you so suspiciously anymore. Deal?"

"If that is all that it takes, I shall bag ten, no, *twenty* wyvern riders for you and show my archery skills for all to see!" Virion exclaimed confidently.

"Whatever you say Virion" Robin chuckled before downing whatever remained in his mug. "Man, need more of this stuff…"

"Excuse my curiosity, but what have you been drinking during our interview. It seems to have made you very…excitable."

"What? Oh no, that's just how I am. 'Excitable Robin' they would call me. Well, if I wasn't already 'Tactician Robin', that is. As for the drink, it's this marvelous thing called 'coffee'. Imported from Valm or some other place I can't remember. Been drinking this stuff all night in order to get through the paperwork Sully dumped on me. Good stuff."

Virion looked at the tactician incredulously. "You have been up all night, drinking nothing but coffee to get through

paperwork?"

"Yep! Pretty proud of it too. Got it all checked in one go! This coffee has been keeping me going for the night and a good part of today. The only downside is that I need to keep drinking, otherwise the headaches, nausea, drowsiness and hunger kick in."

"Have you not slept?"

"SLEEP IS FOR THE WEAK! A good tactician keeps going no matter the circumstances and only stops when he collapses at his desk! Since that hasn't happened yet, I can keep at it." Robin stated confidently.

"I can't…that's absolutely…" Virion was at a loss for words. He then got up and walked to the door. "I shall get you something to drink post haste. Do not move from your desk."

"Is it coffee? Get me more coffee! I'm all out of coffee!"

When Virion returned, he handed Robin a steaming hot cup of something that wasn't coffee.

"Didn't I tell you to get me coffee? This isn't coffee."

"No, it is not. It's better!"

"Better? How?"

"It's guaranteed to make you feel better and get you through the day. Trust me. I am a connoisseur in all things tea and coffee related."

Robin looked at the cup suspiciously before shrugging. "Fine. I'll admit, it does smell good. Besides, if you do poison me, the guards will have your head."

"I would never dream of it! Now, drink up. We need our tactician at his best to ensure our survival."

"Thanks Virion." With that, Robin slowly drank the entire thing in one go. "Mm. That was quite good. What was it, anyway?"

"That was a special blend of Valmese herbal tea. Guaranteed to reenergize and revitalize the body."

"Well it certainly was good!" Robin said before yawning. "Hey, what gives? I don't feel reenergized or revitalized! All I feel is very…sleepy."

Virion gave a sheepish smile. "Yes, well, you see, the tea does make you feel better…after a short nap."

"N-nap? I don't…need a…nap. I'm perfectly f…fine…" Robin yawed again. His eyelids were feeling heavy.

"It's all for the best. You'll thank me when you'll wake up. As I said, we all need our tactician at his best. It's no good for anyone when he's about to keel over. Have a pleasant nap, Robin."

"I-I'll get…you…for…thi…zzzz"

With that, Robin was out like a light.

Thanks for reading! Happy holidays!

Chapter 5: Sumia

Woo, new year and new chapter! New, extra long chapter!

Now, before anyone says anything, I know you don't get Sumia until the later on in the game. But she was in the barracks cutscene, so that still counts!

Robin was a starving man crawling in the blistering heat in some nondescript desert. No matter where he looked, all he could see was the wind blowing sand off the dunes. Sand. So much sand. Not only that, but the thirst that he logically ought to be feeling was noticeably absent. Instead, he felt an incredible hunger, being constantly reminded of it by the rumbling of his stomach. He felt as though he had been trapped in this desert for years and hadn't had a meal in decades (but kept himself surprisingly hydrated). How he was alive, he didn't know or care. All that mattered was finding some food. Any food.

Robin's stomach rumbled once again. He groaned. This was bad. Very, very bad. If things kept going the way they were, he could very realistically die here! Wherever "here" actually was. Not that he actually remembered or cared. In an act of desperation, Robin scooped up a handful of sand and stopped short of putting it in his mouth. For a moment, he hesitated. What was he thinking? Eating sand? That was the single dumbest idea he came up with, and he'd come up with some pretty dumbass ideas! Besides, how would sand actually help him? If anything, it'd make his hunger even worse! There had to be a better solution than this. His stomach apparently had other ideas and conveyed its displeasure by making a painful hunger pang.

Well then. Apparently he was going to eat sand. Maybe if he thought hard enough, he could make his brain believe that it tasted like something else and trick his stomach. Seeing no other alternative, Robin closed his eyes and tried to imagine that he wasn't eating a handful of sand. Surprisingly, it didn't taste like sand. In fact, it tasted like…pie.

Robin tentatively opened his eyes and discovered that he was still in the desert. However, instead of the vast sand dunes that he saw before, Robin noticed that the sand had been replaced…with pies. Pies as far as the eye could see. In fact, the whole desert looked like a giant pie, with the dunes just bumps on its surface.

If this were any other situation, Robin's mind would try to process everything that was happening (and in this case, break itself in the process). But this was not any other situation. Robin was hungry as hell and was not about to look the gift pie in the mouth. So he just ate. The desert/pie tasted surprisingly good! Each handful was a different flavor. He tasted cherry, apple, beef, pecan and many others. It was all very delicious except for the fact that he didn't feel any fuller after each handful. Then out of nowhere, Robin tasted something strange. He paused and chewed slowly, trying to figure out what it was. It tasted like…paper? Why was he suddenly eating paper flavored pie? Pies weren't supposed to taste like paper! As Robin was figuring out the mystery of the paper flavored pie, he felt a hard surface emerging underneath him and his consciousness fading….

Robin slowly opened his eyes.

The first thing he noticed was that he was back in his office. The second thing he noticed was that there was something in his mouth. When he looked down, he saw his desk and the various documents that lay on it. But more importantly, he noticed that there we some documents that looked as though someone chewed and then spit them out. That, and the fact that half a document was in his mouth. Well, that explained the paper flavored pies.

Robin slowly lifted his head off his desk, spat out whatever documents were in his mouth and yawed. That was possibly the best nap that he could remember. Robin made a mental note to thank Virion next time he saw him. The archer may be extravagant and pompous, but his tea did help Robin feel refreshed and rested. It also tasted great.

As Robin thought about all of this, he realized that there was a reason why he was dreaming about pies and eating paper: he was starving! In his excitement in the discovery of coffee and its magical stamina increasing effects, Robin apparently neglected to eat anything. He vaguely remembered Virion telling him as much. That would explain why he felt that the intensity of his hunger was greater than that of a ravenous wolverine. Well no matter. All he needed to do was walk into the royal dining hall and find something to eat. Being in the royal palace, there had to be plenty of high quality food and meals around.

With his mouth salivating at all the possible food, Robin walked out of his office. However, he took only a few steps before a shattering realization stopped him: he had no idea where the royal dining hall was. In fact, he didn't have any idea where anything in the castle was!

This realization hit him harder than a thoron spell. How the hell was he supposed to find anything here? When he first

arrived, no one gave him any sort of tour or showed him where anything was! The only thing that even remotely qualified as a "tour" was Lissa showing him the barracks to meet the other Shepherds. Even then, it was all "here's Emmeryn in the throne room now let's navigate this giant maze of a castle to the barracks to meet the others and now here's your office bye!". The only locations that Robin could even remotely *maybe* find was the main entrance. And that was only if he started in the throne room! The only thing he knew for real was that his office was somewhere close to both the barracks and the throne room. Maybe. Probably? It had to be. He was their new tactician and making his office reachable to both the commander and the other soldiers would make the most sense. Then again, this was a damn castle! Bigger than your average castle even. Who knows how far away "reachable distance" actually was in here?

Robin fought the rising sense of panic within him. He had to think calmly and rationally about this. Panic would get him nowhere. Panic was the enemy… But if panic was the enemy, then what was hunger? Panic distorts your thoughts and makes you think irrationally and impulsively. But hunger actually *kills you* if left to fester. Clearly hunger was the greater enemy than panic. Panic could result in either death or life (depending on how fast you run, how fast the enemy runs, stamina, and other factors) but hunger results in nothing but weakness and death! So hunger was the greatest threat while panic was the destabilizing agent.

Robin's stomach rumbled, snapping him out of his thoughts and reminding him why he stepped out of his office and started thinking of panic and enemies in the first place. He was hungry as hell and wanted food. But he didn't know where to find food in this big ass castle. Right. That was the problem. Now to find the solution.

Robin quickly came up with several options. He could always try his luck and wander around the castle, hoping to stumble upon a kitchen or a storage area or something. But the risk in that was that it would take an unspecified amount of time and was entirely dependent on luck. Robin liked to deal with facts and certainties that he could control. Luck was something that was random, fickle and unpredictable. Plus, he didn't think he could last long enough wandering the halls by himself. He needed food here and now.

Another option was to just ask someone for directions. It was so simple. The only problem was that there was no one around to ask. Robin looked to his left, then his right, then straight ahead. Yep, the halls were emptier than his stomach. What was that all about? He thought that the castle was supposed to be bustling with activity and people. This was looking bad. He briefly entertained the thought of going around and hoping to find someone, but then dismissed it because it ran into the same problems as his first option. Okay, two options down, but the third time's the charm. That's how the saying goes. People don't just make up sayings willy nilly, they obviously have some truth to them. Now to come up wit-

"Oh? Robin? Robin! I was just looking for y-EEK!"

Robin had no idea what happened next. First he heard a voice. As he was turning around, he felt an impact. The next thing he knew, Robin was on the ground with a young woman lying on top of him.

"Ow, and here I thought I could make it a whole day without tripping…" mumbled the woman gloomily. When she looked down to see who she was lying on, her eyes widened.

"Oh my goodness! I am so so so sorry Robin! Sir! I-I didn't mean to fall on you! Please forgive me!"

Once they were both standing, the woman bowed her head. "I am so sorry. I had no intention of falling on you. I-I would ask you to give me another chance to prove myself, but I will understand if you tell me to pack my bags and leave the castle immediately."

"Don't worry about it! It takes more than one fall to bring down a good tact-wait a minute. Leave the castle? Why would I tell you to leave the castle?"

The woman looked as though she was about to cry. "B-because you're firing me?"

Robin looked at her quizzically. "What? I'm not firing you."

"Y-you're not?"

"No! I'm pretty sure that I don't even know you. It's not in my nature to fire people that I don't know…I think."

The woman looked at him with wide eyes before a smile spread across her face. Without warning, she then hugged Robin with a surprising amount of force.

"Oh thank you! Thank you thank you thank you! I swear you won't regret this sir!"

"I…already…am. You're hugging me…in full…armor. Can't…breathe…"

Realizing what he said, the woman let him go immediately. Robin staggered a bit and needed a few seconds to catch his breath.

"Alright. Before we start, let me ask you a question: why are you so formal and keep calling me sir?

"Because you're our chief tactician. Your post is higher than mine and demands I treat you with formality and respect."

"Okay. Forget that.

"I'm sorry?"

"Dispense with the formality nonsense. It's kinda weirding me out. Just call me Robin."

"If you insist…Robin."

"Thank you. Now that that's settled, I believe some proper introductions are in order. I am Robin, as you already know. To whom do I have the pleasure of talking to?"

The woman cleared her throat. "Not to sound impertinent, but we've already met before."

"We have?"

"Yes. I was at the barracks with the others when you were introduced to us."

"You were? Alrighty then. That makes this a bit awkward. Let me just roll past this and try to remember who you are…"

Robin's brows knitted in thought. "Let's see now… Lissa was there. The burping one was there. The prissy noble was there. I already know Sully and Virion. Hmm…"

"If you don't mind, I could always reintroduce myself."

"Shhhhh! Don't spoil it. I'm almost there…aaannd ah HA! You're the cute, clumsy one. And your name is…Sa…So…Su…mi…a. Sumia. SUMIA! Your name is Sumia!"

Robin looked at Sumia triumphantly. "See? I remember. It may take a while but I get there in the end!"

When she didn't respond, Robin came a bit closer. "Hey, are you alright? You're being awfully quite there. Woah, your face is all red! Are you coming down with something?"

Sumia looked up at him in alarm. "What? No! I-I'm perfectly healthy! It's just that your description of me is…I mean…"

"Oh sorry about that. When I have trouble remembering people's names I just remember them by their most visible characteristics. Nothing personal, but some people are good at tactics while others are good at names, you know?"

"What? Oh, yes. Of course."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes! Never better! Right as rain and all that! Ha ha ha…"

Robin looked at her questioningly before shrugging. "Okay then. Did you want to see me in particular or were you just passing by?"

"Oh? Oh yes, that's right! I heard you were doing a combat review of all Shepherds and firing those who didn't pass. So I thought I'd make my way here right away and make my case."

"Wow, word sure spreads fast. Okay, why don't you step into my office and-" Robin was interrupted by his stomach growling. Suddenly, he was reminded of why he stepped out of his office in the first place. The all-consuming hunger that he somehow managed to ignore in the last few minutes suddenly came back with a vengeance. There was no way he could effectively interview now. Not when he had food on his mind. But hey! He could just ask Sumia! She had to know where they kept the food.

Robin silently thanked the gods for sending him this lifeline and turned to Sumia to ask her about the kitchen-

"Shall we begin the interview? I'm sure there are things that I can do to make myself useful to the Shepherds."

-only to stop and close his mouth. Sumia was smiling at him. Now it could've been the lighting, or something in the air,

or his hunger-induced lightheadedness, but Robin thought that refusing her request would be like refusing her. Then she would be sad and have the same expression she did when she thought he was going to fire her. That would, in turn, make Robin feel as though he kicked a puppy. A three legged puppy.

So he obviously had to interview her despite vicious protests from his stomach. Well, when in pursuit of the greater good (as well as effective unit cohesion), some sacrifices have to be made. Robin supposed he could see this as some sort of endurance training: how long he could function on an empty stomach before he either fainted, went on some sort of hunger rampage or started eating weird things (books and paper not included). Yes. That makes sense. Endurance training. Delaying finding food and purposely starving himself further is all part of it. Testing his limits and all that.

Having thus made up his mind, Robin smiled and invited Sumia into his office. Once they sat down, Robin got out his roster notes.

"Right. According to my notes, you are a pegasus knight. Is this accurate?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now what combat experience do you have?"

Sumia fidgeted nervously. "U-um, well…none."

Robin looked up from his notes. "No combat experience?"

"I'm afraid not.

"That's a bit odd. Why not?"

Sumia sighed. "Well, I know that I'm part of the Shepherds and that requires me to go out on sorties whenever trouble occurs, but whenever something does happen, I can't help but think that I'll just get in the way. So I just stay behind and train."

"Hm. Why do think you'll get in the way?"

"Well you saw me. I somehow manage to trip over nothing, I can't do anything right and when I try to do something, I just end up creating a big mess!"

"Come now Sumia, that's not true at all! I'm positive that there are things that you can do that others can't. You just don't notice because you're so hung up on your negative traits."

"Do you really think so?"

"I know so!" Robin said confidently. "I mean sure, you may not feel that it's the right time for you to fight on the front lines. That's alright. Everyone has those worries. But there will be a moment when you feel confident enough to step out and fight. And you know what? You'll then realize that you're an integral part of the Shepherds."

"W-wow." Sumia looked at Robin with wide eyes. "You say that with so much certainty that it makes me want to believe you."

"Believe it! You're a Shepherd. That means that you have a special talent that separates you from the crowd. You just haven't discovered it yet. Besides, I'm sure your off battlefield skills can more than make up for your lack of combat experience. We'll just have to assess how. Tell me what you like to do when not training."

"Well, when I'm not on the training grounds, I like to read and see what the future has in store for me through flower fortunes."

"Alrighty then. Flower fortunes may be a bit superstitious, but as long as they put you at ease or achieve your dreams, who am I to judge what other people put their faith in? It's a motivational exercise! And as an avid reader myself, I can safely say that is a good way to broaden your horizons and learn new things. See? Your hobbies are already helping by making you a motivated, more experienced individual! What else?"

"Oh wow, I never thought of it that way. Well, I also like to help others around camp if I can. Doing things like laundry, cleaning up here and there, cooki-" a look of horror suddenly spread across Sumia's face.

"Er, Sumia? Are you alright? You've gone quiet on me."

"Oh gods! I'm sorry Robin! I have something urgent to do!" Without waiting for a reply, Sumia suddenly rushed out of

Robin's office.

The tactician blinked in confusion, trying to comprehend what just happened. Robin looked at Sumia's chair, then his notes, then at the door. One minute everything was going smoothly and the next, Sumia ran out like her house was on fire. Was it something he said?

"Did…did I just end the interview? I don't remember ending the interview. But she left, so something must've happened. But what? Why did she suddenly run out of my office? What made her look so panicked? Why are there so many questions? More importantly, why am I talking to myself?"

Robin stomach gave a very audible growl. Oh right. Food. That's how this whole thing started. It probably spoke volumes about how hungry he was if his desk started to look like one big, appetizing chocolate bar. Mmmm, chocolate. He could almost taste it. Heck, maybe if he took a page from his dream and bit off a piece, it would actually taste like chocolate.

As Robin was debating whether or not he should start eating his desk, Sumia ran back in.

"I-I'm so s-sorry Robin!" she panted. "I completely forgot that I had this in the oven."

"What? Oh, hey Sumi-" Robin began to say before he froze.

There. In her hands. His eyes widened and his hands began to tremble. It was possibly the most beautiful sight that he saw within the last 48 hours. It was round and perfectly proportioned. The crust looked succulently crispy and the smell! Gods the smell! It smelled like the sweetest, most delicious thing on the entire planet. Everything about it made Robin realize how hungry he was and how amazingly tasty it would be. He could only imagine the flavors locked inside its sweet, crispy interior.

"Th-that's…Y-you…" Robin tried and failed to form a coherent sentence.

"Sorry I ran off like that, Robin. I was in the middle of cooking this pie when I heard you were assessing our usefulness in combat. I got so scared that I immediately ran off to find you, forgetting that this was sitting in the oven. I thought it would be best to get it before a fire started or something."

"That's…perfectly alright Sumia." Robin gulped. "It looks like you managed to save your pie."

"Yes!" Sumia exclaimed excitedly. "Thank the gods for small miracles. After a dozen failed attempts, I was beginning to lose hope. But I finally got it right! Look at it. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Y-yes. It certainly is." *It looks like the most beautiful thing on the planet with its perfect color and its perfect shape and its perfect stuffing and its perfect flavor and I bet it tastes as good as it looks and Gods damn it I'm so hungry that it's taking all of my willpower not to just jump and devour this thing right here and now.*

"I take it you cook often?"

"Oh no! This is something I decided to pick up recently. Since I don't go fight on the front lines, I thought I'd do more back at camp and decided to try my hand at cooking."

"Based on this pie, I can tell that you have exceptional cooking skills." *Try not to look directly at it if you pretend that it's not there then it'll be easier to ignore it but what can't be ignored is the smell Gods it smells delicious!*

Sumia blushed. "Thank you Robin. Truth be told, I've lost count how many times I screwed up before getting it right."

"It's the end result that matters." Robin's throat was feeling dry. His stomach demanded sustenance! It was becoming increasingly hard to concentrate on anything other than the pie in front of him.

"Would you like a piece?"

Everything stopped. Nothing mattered anymore. Sumia asked the question that he desperately wanted to hear but thought impossible. Robin looked up at her and gulped.

"Are you sure?"

The pegasus knight giggled. "Of course Robin. You haven't been very subtle. Ever since I came in here, you have been staring at my pie so very intently. Oh, and you're drooling."

Robin was too hungry and excited to be embarrassed. But he still had enough self-control to keep his composure and not throw himself at Sumia's feet and thank her over and over again. He very calmly wiped his mouth and cleared his

throat.

"Thank you Sumia. While I appreciate the gesture, I'm not sure now is the time for eating. We are still in the middle of your interview and my office doesn't make the best dining space and there is so much stuff here and do you really mean it?"

"Yes. This is the first pie that came out right and I would be grateful if you gave me your honest opinion on how it tastes."

"When you put it that way, how could I refuse? It would be an honor to be your first official pie taste tester!"

"Thank you Robin. I really appreciate it."

The tactician just nodded. This was it. The moment that he had been waiting for. All that time talking and not eating came down to this. He had managed to beat down the scourge that was his hunger long enough for the Gods to send him a reward for his efforts. And what a reward it was! He watched with bated breath as Sumia slowly cut the pie, then handed a piece to him. Oh sure, it might've been nothing more than a piece of pie, but to Robin it was the most precious thing in the world. He held it as though it could break at any minute. He took his time to soak in its texture, its smell and everything about it. Robin knew that savoring all of these details will make it taste even better.

When he could hold himself back no longer, he brought the pie to his mouth, bit off a piece and…

Five seconds passed. Then ten. Fifteen. The room was dead silent. Nothing moved. Sumia started fidgeting.

"So? What do you think?" she asked nervously.

"This…is…this is…" Robin took a deep breath. "Amazing! Superb! Divine! The epitome of culinary cuisine! This, and all every other positive adjective that you can think of! You know what? There aren't enough words in the world to describe how good this pie is! If the Gods came down to Earth and if they were pies, this would be the one pie to rule them all. All the other pies would look on in envy at your pie because it would be the most magnificent and the most excellent pie among pies. Taste buds would bow down because of the overwhelmingly tasty flavor of your pie. No. they won't bow down, they would be blown away! This is the pie that will pierce the heavens with its deliciousness! Your pie is the hurricane that knocks down all of the inferior pies and ushers in a golden age of pies! It's…it's…"

"Woah, easy there Robin!" Sumia quickly rushed to the tactician's side. "Thank you for all the compliments, but you have to calm down, otherwise you'll choke."

"Right. Right, sorry. I guess I did get a bit overexcited there. It's just…your pie is so good! I wanted to properly express just how good it was. And, let's just say this is a very overwhelming time for me."

Sumia chuckled. "Do you always get so worked up over pies?"

"Only the really good ones."

Once she made sure that Robin was alright, Sumia sat back down in her chair. Meanwhile, the tactician made sure to savor every last bit of the greatest pie he had ever had (that he could remember).

After finishing, Robin gave a satisfied sigh. "Well Sumia, I can safely say that this pie turned out pretty good."

"Yes, you made that very clear. Thank you Robin. Would you like another piece?"

Robin swore his heart skipped a few beats.

"A-are you serious?"

Sumia smiled. "Of course. You've made it quite clear how much you like it. It would be very rude of me to take that away from you."

"Sumia…will you marry me?"

"Robin!" The pegasus knight blushed furiously. "Don't joke like that! What if the others heard that? What would they think?"

"Who's joking? I'm dead serious." Robin stuffed another piece of pie in his mouth. "Your pies are the essence of perfection itself. I love them, which means that I also love you. I'd gladly spend the rest of my life with both of you. What's the problem?"

"Robin, please stop. This is embarrassing! What's more, I can't tell if you're being serious or not."

The tactician shrugged. "Suit yourself. The offer still stands though. If you ever find yourself in need of a dashing husband, I'm always available."

"Right. Now about my position with the Shepherds…"

"Oh that? Don't worry about it."

Sumia blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Don't worry about it." Robin repeated. "I'm not going to fire you. You've already proven yourself."

"I did?"

"Yep!" Robin cut himself another piece. "See, you've already proven to me that you want to help. You also said that you like to train in your spare time. When not training, you carry out some very essential tasks around camp. Finally, you have the innate ability to cook. That is one of the most important traits to have, right up there with being able to fight."

"Is cooking really so important?" asked Sumia curiously.

"Of course! It's all well and good that we have a bunch of capable fighters in our ranks. But if no one knows how to cook, we'll all die of starvation or malnutrition out on the field before we even engage the enemy. Proper meals are that important. Speaking of which, man your pie is good. Do you cook anything else?"

"Oh no. I thought I'd start with pies and then move on to other dishes once I got good enough."

"Well, I'd say you're pretty good already! But if you decide you need more practice, I'll be happy to lend my taste testing services free of charge!"

"Thank you Robin. I think I'll take you up on that offer. Since you said how important having a good meal is for the others, I'll do my best and learn how to cook the best dishes around!"

"That's the spirit! And don't worry about your lack of combat experience. My gut tells me you'll have plenty of it soon enough. My gut's never wrong! And that's not your pie talking."

Sumia got up, fiery determination in her eyes. "Thanks for the pep talk Robin. I'm off to practice and learn new recipes. When I have something new prepared, you'll be the first to know."

Robin waved after her. "We all have faith in you Sumia. All you need is to have faith in yourself!"

"I won't let you down!"

With that, Sumia left the office with a new spring in her step. She even managed not to trip over anything.

After watching her go, Robin sighed contentedly, jotted down a few notes in his roster and ate the last piece of Sumia's pie. He probably should've discussed her skills more. He also probably should've let her do the talking and he probably should've assessed her better.

But screw it. She was a pegasus knight. That meant she was fast and could fly. That was already a big tactical bonus. She could also cook one hell of a pie. And that was always very important.

Pie-er Emblem strikes again! As always, thanks for reading!

Chapter 6: Vaike

Behold! I've struggled against foes including (but not limited to) life's troubles, general boredom and writer's block to bring you an UPDATE!

And yes, I know you don't get Vaike this early but he was also in the cutscene!

Comments and critque always welcome. Enjoy!

Robin was feeling quite satisfied. And why wouldn't he feel satisfied? He got through an ungodly amount of paperwork in record time, drank some pretty good and exotic tea, had a great nap and then stuffed his face with perhaps the tastiest pie in the history of forever. Life was good. All he had to do now was…was…what *did* he have to do now?

Robin leaned back in his chair, put his legs up on his desk and thought. Well, Chrom did mention going to Regna Ferox the next morning on some political mission. That was something. Then again, it really wasn't something that Robin thought required his time. In fact, Chrom and the others probably knew the path better than Robin did simply because they knew where to go. Robin supposed he could always draft new battle plans and strategies just in case they met trouble along the way. That actually sounded like a good idea, all things considered. Things were bad and they were probably going to get worse. Besides, Robin noticed that he wasn't the luckiest person around. Ever since Chrom found him face down in some field, Robin had faced bandits, saw the earth spit fire, saw some sort of portal in the sky, saw a masked swordsman jump out of said portal in the sky, was attacked by horrible undead abominations and had multiple near-death experiences. All that within a span of a week. So yeah. Drafting battle plans was probably the best course of action. Now he had to think of the bes-

"ENTER THE VAIKE!"

"GAH!"

A loud voice started Robin out of his thoughts. The voice also caused him to lose his balance and fall backwards in his chair. He then found himself lying on the ground with a sharp pain at the back of his head. Well this was annoying (and somewhat painful). Robin was starting to notice a pattern here. Somehow, through some diabolical mechanisms and by some inexplicable circumstances, he always ended up on the ground. That was how Chrom found him. That was how Lissa woke him up (kind of) and how he met Sumia again for the first time. Wonderful. If this kept up, he could soon take her reputation as the clumsiest Shepherd. Worst of all, that wasn't even his fault! (well, mostly. He could at least control his reactions and *try* not to fall off the chairs that he sat in).

Robin slowly got up and rubbed the back of his head.

"Sorry for startlin' ya Robin. You alright?"

"Fine." Robin grumbled. "I'm getting depressingly used this kind of thing."

As he got up, Robin looked over and saw a shirtless muscled man in front of him. Huh. That was new. Wait, no it wasn't. Robin definitely met this character before. And his name was…

"Vaike?"

"The one and only!"

"Riiight. Well what brings you here? Actually, forget that. Let me ask you this: what's with the barging in? Don't you ever knock? I could've been doing something very important that required peace, quiet and intense concentration. And then here you are with your loud voice and your not knocking on the door. What's up with that?"

Vaike stepped back at the unexpected barrage of questions. "Well…I…uh…your door was open?"

"So what? Someone may have forgotten to close it, or I could've been hot in my office. There could be countless reasons why my door was open. That still doesn't mean you can just come in here and be all shouting and stuff. I even have a sign outside my office telling people to knock!"

Vaike looked at Robin. Then at the door. Then back at Robin. "No you don't."

"…I don't?" Robin walked over and looked at his door. Then outside his office. It was true. There was no trace of any sign.

"Huh. I swear I put up a sign. It seemed like such a good idea. Then again, I wanted my door to be open to all so that I

everyone felt welcome…" Robin kept muttering as he walked back to his desk. "Note to self: make some sort of sign asking people to knock before they enter."

After making his note, Robin looked up and smiled. "Well, it seems like I don't have a sign after all. I thank you for bringing this to my attention Vaike."

"Um…you're welcome?"

"Great! Now what brings you to my humble office?"

Vaike was momentarily confused at the sudden change in conversation. However, he quickly recovered.

"The Vaike heard that you were callin' up all the Shepherds into your office for somethin'. And I thought that whatever it is, it can't be complete without ol' Teach! So here I am."

"I can see that. Alrighty then, let's get started. Just tell me about yourself. What do you do? What's your role around here? Why do you refer to yourself in the third person and don't wear a shirt?"

"All good questions! Alright, let Teach take you to class on what Teach does around here. Firstly, the Vaike's the army's fighter. One of the strongest, in fact."

"That's quite a bold claim."

"And it's all true, my tactician friend! Thanks to countless hours of trainin' and an intense regimen, the Vaike can now hit harder than an ogre. I mean, look at these muscles!"

Vaike then proceeded to strike various poses and showed of his biceps.

Robin eyed Vaike curiously. "Hmm. I suppose your muscles are bigger than that of the average warrior. Certainly bigger than mine. It would make sense that you would hit your enemies harder than say, me. But claiming to be one of the strongest Shepherds when we have people like Chrom in our army? I dunno. Speaking of which, you're well acquainted with Chrom aren't you? Fought together? Trained together? Can you hold your own in a one on one fight with him?"

"Har! You bet! The Vaike and Chrom are rivals. Archrivals even! So every chance we get, it's all spar spar and spar some more! Teach can't even count how many times we trained together."

"That's nice. So of all these times you guys sparred, how many times did you win? Or did all those matches just end in draws?"

"Err, well, the Vaike totally wins…once in a while…every 5 matches or so?"

Robin frowned. "I would be more inclined to believe that if you didn't end that phrase with a question mark. But, I will give you the benefit of the doubt because Chrom is freakishly strong. I mean, do you see what happens when that guy trains?"

Vaike laughed. "See it? Heck, ol' Teach is usually in the middle of that whole thing! I usually don't pay that much attention, but when we're all done training, a whole lotta stuff ends up being broken. Trainin' dummies, practice equipment, Chrom even managed to knock a door clean off its hinges a few times!"

"Yes, I'm aware. I saw the amount of money that goes to repairing the training grounds and replacing equipment. Gods, do you know what percentage of the haildom's revenue goes towards repairs and replacements on the training grouds? I'll tell you: a very big one! Looking over the country's expenses made me want to cry since we're practically bleeding money. Money that could've otherwise gone towards new weapons, tomes, tonics, staves, office stuff…" Robin now had a faraway look in his eyes.

"Robin? You there?"

"Hmm? Oh Vaike! Hey! Uh, what were we talking about again?"

"Me trainin' with Chrom and my strengths...I think."

"Right! So we've established that you can hold your own against Chrom. Sort of. Now about the others? I'm pretty sure the others are no joke when it comes to physical combat. What about Frederick? He seems pretty big, and I'm almost sure that it's not just his armor."

"Robin, Chrom and the Vaike are sworn archrivals. We're destined to fight and better each other for all eternity! So most

of the time, I've been fightin' with him. But when he's off doing his leader-type things, ol' Teach does mix it up a little. Gotta admit, don't think I've fought Frederick yet. That one never seems to be free. And when he is, it's during his 'Fanatical Fitness Hour', after which everyone's dead tired. But I have fought Sully before! More so recently too."

"Sully, huh? Well, she's definitely one of the stronger Shepherds I met recently. You say you fought her often?"

"Yep! The past few days Sully's been hittin' the training grounds like a woman possessed. She's been challengin' all sorts to spar with her. It's gotten real intense, like somethin's changed and she needs to prove herself by fightin' everyone in sight. Weird huh?"

Robin laughed nervously. "Yeah, totally weird. I don't know what happened but I definitely have nothing to do with it. She probably just felt she had to prove something to herself. Yeah, that's it! Speaking of Sully, I see you got a bunch of nasty looking bruises on your body. Her doing?"

"That's right!" Vaike proclaimed proudly. "I gotta say, fightin' with Sully's been almost as intense as fightin' with Chrom. Ol' Teach actually took some hard hits that needed healin'."

"Yeah, no kidding. That brings to mind another question: why don't you ever wear any armor? Or a shirt or something? Surely wearing armor has more benefits that simply running around shirtless?"

"Ehh. The Vaike's never been much of a fan or armor. That stuff's way to heavy and noisy and gets in the way. The Vaike prefers to travel light and hit hard! Besides, Teach didn't get this body by hiding behind some silly armor. The way I see it, the more punishment I take, the more punishment I can withstand and dish out! Look at this. Teach's all covered in these bruises and I'm still standing here smilin' and talking to you."

"So you're saying you can withstand more pain because you slowly get used to it, huh? That sounds dangerous and painful. I wouldn't personally subscribe to that theory but it seems interesting nonetheless."

"The Vaike senses your doubt. Then let's have a little demonstration. I'll stand right here and you hit me in the chest with all your strength! Watch ol' Teach take your hit without even a cringe or grimace."

"I don't think that's really nec-"

"Aw, don't be like that! C'mon Robin, let Teach take you to class and impart his hard earned wisdom upon you."

The tactician chuckled. Well, when you put it that way. Who am I do disregard free wisdom?"

"That's the spirit!" Vaike exclaimed enthusiastically. He then stuck his chest out and put his hands on his hips. "Now hit me with your best shot! Fire away!"

"Firing away now." Robin took a deep breath, ran towards Vaike, swung, and…

True to his word, Vaike didn't flinch. His smile didn't falter even the slightest bit.

"Har! See that? Didn't feel a thing! I-Robin? What's wrong? You don't look so good."

Indeed, the tactician had a curious expression on his face. It seemed like a mix of shock and pain. Before Vaike could ask any more questions, Robin suddenly clenched his hand and let out a loud, pained shout.

"ARGH! Gods damn it! My hand!"

"Robin! What happened!?"

"Urgh. I feel like I just punched a stone wall and all the bones in my hand just shattered. Damn Vaike, what the hell are you made of?!"

"Well I'm glad you asked! The Vaike takes special care to-wait, No! Robin, you're hurt pretty bad. Stay here and lemme fetch a healer for ya right now."

"Th-thanks, but that won't be necessary."

"You sure?" Vaike asked uncertainly.

"Heh, a good tactician plans for even the most unprobable circumstances." Robin winced as he searched for something in his coat with his good hand. He eventually pulled out a bottle, removed the cork with his teeth and downed it all in one go. After a finishing, he gave a disgusted grunt.

"You know, I'll never understand why concoctions always taste so gross. I mean, it's such a common healing item you'd think they'd at least make it taste better or something. I'm sure that if it tasted like strawberries, I would be much more willing to drink them."

"The Vaike knows what you're talking about all too well. During all those epic fights with Chrom, Teach got many wounds that were too minor for healers. So more often than not, I was gulpin' down some dishwater tastin' concoctions. No matter how many times ya drink 'em, the taste never gets any better."

"Yeah, no kidding." Robin carefully moved his hand and fingers. "Alright, looks like healing's kicking in. Hand should be good as new in a couple of hours."

"That's good to hear. Sorry that got kinda out of hand there."

"What? Oh, don't worry about it! It was a valuable learning experience."

"It…was?"

"You bet! My sword hand's gonna be fine and I got some valuable info on your strengths and how to use you out in the battlefield. A fine days' work, I'd say!"

"We're quite optimistic, ain't we? Glad I could help."

"Great. You know what? I've thought of something and now I need to test it. You mind?"

"No problem. The Vaike is always ready to lend a hand! Waddya need?"

"I need to hit you again."

Vaike blinked. "Really? After what just happened? You sure that's a good idea Robin?"

"Come on, Vaike. I'm not going to make the same mistake twice! I'm also not going to hit you as hard. Besides, this'll help me test out a theory that I came up with."

"Well…alright. The Vaike will oblige since he trusts ya. And as long as it helps ya with them theories you come up with." He then stood in the middle of the room and prepared himself. "Whenever you're ready."

"Alright." This time, Robin didn't run and swing. Instead, he stood in front of Vaike, channelled some energy into this hand and made a fist. "Get ready. Here comes a THUNDER PUNCH!"

As soon as Robin's fist made contact with Vaike's chest, the latter gave a surprised yelp and fell on the ground, twitching occasionally.

"Wow. I can't believe that actually worked! You alright there, Vaike?"

As Robin helped him up, the fighter groaned. "God's beards Robin! Whaddya hit me with? It hurt pretty bad and makes me feel all…tingly."

"Heh, sorry about that. I just channelled some magic energy into my fist before I hit you. So you just experienced my patented Thunder Punch. It's a good thing I didn't hurt my tome hand, otherwise we never would have made this amazing discovery!"

"Wow, that's mighty impressive Robin. Ya plannin' to go melee now?"

"Not really. This is more for an 'oh crap I have no sword and my tome burned' type of situation. I still prefer cutting bandits with my trusty sword and blasting them with a tome."

"Fair 'nough. Wait a minute, you *just* made that thing up? Ain't that a bit dangerous?"

"Don't worry, I didn't channel *all* my magic energy into the hit. Just a little bit. I would never try out something dangerous on you guys! Contrary to popular belief, I'm a tactician, not insane. Besides, this little experiment helped me learn something else about you."

"Really?"

"Yep! You can take physical hits like a champ, but not so much when it comes to magic."

"Huh. I suppose that's true. Teach's been trainin' for a while, but magic's always hurt a lot more than regular weapons."

"Don't worry, I'll figure it out. Aw, look at us bonding! All I need is one more test to run and we're done!"

Vaike laughed heartily. "I guess it is bondin', in a way. Whaddya need?"

"Oh, nothing major. I just need some way to test your strength." Robin opened his closet. "I swear I have something in here, like a bag, or a board or something for you hit…"

As the tactician rummaged through his closet, Vaike looked around the room. He got an idea once his eyes settled on something.

"Hey Robin, ya don't need to go looking for anthin' in the closet. Teach can show ya exactly how strong he is right here, right now!"

"Really? How do you propose to do that?"

"Like this. IT'S VAIKE TIME!"

Before Robin could react or even turn around, he heard a loud, crashing sound behind him. *I could just not turn around and walk away right now.* That was an option. Not one he would take, but it was there. Of course, Robin liked to face problems and solve them as soon as possible, no matter how bad they were. With this in mind, he slowly turned his head and prepared for the worst.

"Oh no." It was bad. Very, very bad. No, it was worse than bad. It was both bad and terrible. It was terribad! Because right there, in front of his eyes, stood Vaike. But that's not what made it bad. What made it bad was that…

"You broke my desk!"

Vaike grinned. "That's right! Look at that. Split that thing in two with only my bare hands! Does that prove Teach's strength of what?"

"You BROKE my DESK!"

"Yeah! See, 'cause it was the onl-"

"YOU BROKE MY DESK!"

Now, Vaike wouldn't call himself the smartest or the most intuitive member of the Shepherds, but even he could sense that something was wrong. When he looked over at Robin, he noticed that the tactician was glaring at him. But it was no ordinary glare. It was one of the coldest, most intense glares that Vaike had ever experienced. And he had his fair share of glares! Vaike swore that the temperature in the room dropped because of the coldness of the glare he was currently receiving.

"I should fire you for this." Robin muttered darkly.

"What!? Why? Because of the desk? Can't you just buy a new one?"

"A new one?! That desk was one of a kind! Made purely of imported wood from the furthest regions of Valm, specially crafted by specialist desk makers that have been crafting fine wooded desk for centuries and enchanted by the best mages to keep it brand new! It's also the exact size for all my needs. Wide enough to keep all my papers while at the same time keeping everything within arm's reach! It's a special, unique, one of a kind desk that can never be made ever again!"

Vaike gulped nervously. "R-really?"

Robin remained silent. "I don't know. Maybe? I'd like to think so. It does make it sound special, doesn't it? But that's not the point!"

"Wait, if that ain't the point, then why're you so angry? Ya can always buy a new one, right?"

"I suppose. And I guess you can be a useful asset on the battlefield. But the same time, you can't just go around breaking people's things. So here's what's gonna happen: I'm putting you on probation."

"Probation?"

"Yes. Probation. From now on, I'm going to watch your performance and decide whether I should fire you or not. If you do good, then you'll stay. But if you do something dumb, then you're out. Simple, isn't it?"

"…all this because I broke your desk?"

"It's part of my new office. I take my office things very seriously. Besides, don't think of this as your probation period, think of it as a self-improvement exercise. You either become better or you get fired. What better motivation do you need?"

"Uh…"

"Well this has been fun, but unfortunately I'm going to have to shoo you away because I have to prepare for tomorrow's march. It's been good to meet you Vaike. Drop by anytime and remember to do your best! Okay, bye!"

Robin pushed Vaike out of his office and closed the door behind him. He then turned around and sighed at the mess. His papers and books where lying everywhere, there were ink stains on the floor and wood all over his workspace. He spent hours getting everything nice and neat too.

A knock on the door snapped him out of his thoughts.

"Robin? You in there?"

"Come in, Chrom."

"Thanks, I just wanted to see if…you're…what happened here?"

Robin sighed. "Oh nothing. Just Vaike."

"Did 'ol Teach' try to show you his strength by breaking your desk in two?"

"Yeeep."

Chrom chuckled. "Cheer up Robin. I'll give you a requisition paper and you can order yourself a brand new, fancy desk. I'm sure it'll get here by the time we return from Regna Ferox too."

"Well, that does make feel a little bit better. Thanks Chrom."

"Well now that that's settled, want to get some food before we hit the road?"

"Sure. I'm always up for some food."

Robin felt better. Much better, in fact. Chrom had a point. Robin would pick a fine desk with some office ornaments and go off for this diplomatic thing in Regna Ferox. By the time they would get back, his office would have more stuff in it and look new and awesome and great. Robin just had to be patient. They wouldn't be gone for long anyway. This was just a simple diplomatic mission. What could possibly happen between now and then?

Chapter 7: Stahl

You know that feeling when you want to write but life gets in the way? I don't care for it.

Robin was in a bad mood. It wasn't because they were now camping and living outdoors without such luxuries as beds, mattresses or heating, or because he still remembered his broken desk back in his office (though that still put a damper on his mood whenever he thought about it). It wasn't even the ravenous groups of undead (or Risen, as they've come to be officially called) that started appearing all over the place that got him in a bad mood (because unlike with regular, living soldiers, Robin didn't feel bad when he killed Risen. Quite the opposite in fact. Robin felt like he was doing a public service every time he cut down/burned/shocked and otherwise removed a squad of Risen. Because after the harrowing, life or death battle was over, returning them to Naga knows where they came from was his feel good deed of the day). No, all that was not why he was in a bad mood. The reason why Robin was in a bad mood was because of his tent. Or, more specifically, the lack of space in his tent.

When Robin arrived in Ylisstol and was shown his office, he quickly got used to all the space and luxury. But mostly the space. In his office, he had a nice comfy chair, multiple shelves filled with books and most importantly, a big desk that fit all his papers, documents and other miscellaneous knickknacks. Gods he missed his office desk. Now that the Shepherds have hit the road, he didn't have all that. What he did have was a small plank of wood, attached to other small planks of wood and supported by four smaller planks of wood that he had to pass off as a desk. And that would've been fine if it was still the early days. Days when the Shepherds consisted of himself, Chrom, Frederick and Lissa. Those days were much simpler. There was no need for complicated strategies or thought-out manoeuvres. The entire battle could be won by telling Lissa to stay back, paring up with Chrom and sending Frederick straight into the enemy. Come to think of it, he and Chrom were only needed to clean up the stragglers. Frederick was amazingly efficient at taking out whatever enemies were unlucky enough to get in his way (then again, Robin shouldn't be too surprised, considering it's *Frederick* and the knight's almost obsessive need to do things to match his insanely high standards, whether that be clearing pebbles or killing things).

Those were the days. Literally days, because later on, Robin had met Sully and Virion. And a few days after that, he found himself in the capital and was introduced to a bunch of new Shepherds. Now he had to take into account everyone's strengths, weaknesses, weapon conditions and a bunch of other things. All those statistics and draft battle strategies required paper. Lots and lots of paper. He also needed quills, ink and most importantly, a spacious desk to write all this stuff down. All that he had in his office. Now that he was out in the field, the only thing Robin lacked was a proper desk. But that was perhaps the most important thing because as it was, he couldn't work properly on his tiny excuse for a desk. This problem was usually remedied by working in the command tent. But sometimes, the command tent got too much traffic and Robin had to go back to his tent. Once there, he would try to organize his papers and draft something…before quickly giving up in frustration and wandering outside.

This was exactly what he was doing now. After another fruitless attempt at working in his tent and once again entertaining the thought of stealing the work table from the command tent, Robin decided the best course of action was to get some fresh air. At least it was a nice day. The sun was shining, the birds were singing and the sounds of people sparring were in the air. What more could a person ask for? Well, aside from a proper work desk…and maybe some better tomes, and a better sword and maybe-

"Oh, Robin! Yoo-hoo! Robin!"

A voice snapped him out his wishful thinking. The tactician looked around to see Sumia running toward him with a basket in her hands.

"Sumia! What a pleasant surprise! What can I do for you?"

The pegasus knight smiled. "Oh, well actually…"

But Robin's tactician's senses tuned out what Sumia said. As a tactician, he was responsible for the wellbeing and alivestaying of the army. His job was to solve problems on the battlefield (and some off it too, apparently) and plan for all possible situations. Where possible, he was also supposed to spot where problems could arise and make sure prevent them. This was one such moment. He saw Sumia. She was kind and sweet but the girl had an almost unnatural ability to trip on the most mundane things, if anything at all! (Although no matter how many times she fell or how bad she hurt herself, she never had any bruises or lasting damage. How did she manage that? Robin made a mental note to pursue this line of thinking at a later time). But at this moment, he also saw a twig in her path. If she was anyone else, she would just walk over it at that would be that. But she wasn't anyone else. She was Sumia. And given her "talent", Robin could already see where this was headed. Naturally, his mind started frantically coming up with ways to prevent the upcoming disaster. This was the tactician's curse. While he was gifted with tactical skills that allowed him to foresee and plan for

almost any outcome, the downside was that it also caused him to think of all these plans in situations that would otherwise require more action and less thought. Fortunately, in such occasions, his instincts took over and his body sprang into action. Unfortunately, while his head was calm and rational, his instincts leaned more towards impulsivity and tended to have a lack of self-preservation. This usually resulted in Robin finding himself in situations with varying degrees of hurt.

Like now. Before he knew what happened, Robin found himself lying on the ground (yet again) with his head hurting (also again), his hands stretched above him holding Sumia's basket and Sumia lying with her eyes shut on top of him. Robin sighed. Gods, barring the pretty lady lying on top of him, this situation was becoming depressingly familiar.

Meanwhile, Sumia tentatively opened her eyes when the expected impact with the hard ground didn't happen.

"Wha-? Robin?"

The tactician smiled. "Hey Sumia! We really do have to stop meeting like this. It'll give others the wrong idea."

The pegasus knight looked confused for a moment. Upon realizing the position they were in, a blush quickly appeared on her face and she hurriedly got on her feet. After apologizing and helping Robin up, Sumia sighed sadly.

"I'm so, so sorry! Robin, I swear I didn't-"

"It's fine! I'm fine. You don't have to apologize so much."

"But still…"

"Sumia, I assure you that everything's good. Don't worry about it."

"I-if you say so."

"I do."

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Well, my nose hurts a bit, but there's no blood so it's cool. Now let's just wait until the world stops being all spinny. Wait for it…There. Back to normal. See? Everything's all back to normal."

Sumia giggled. "Wow, Robin. Nothing gets you down, does it?"

"Oh no, there are definitely things that bum me out. I just choose not to dwell on them. It helps." Robin then noticed that he was still holding Sumia's basket. "Oh, I should probably hand this to you now, huh?"

"Actually, that's why I wanted to see you."

"It is?"

"Yes. I wanted to give it to you and get your honest opinion."

"My opinion?" Robin removed the cloth on the basket. His eyes widened when he saw what was inside it. "Sumia. Is that…is that what I think it is?"

"Yep! Fresh out of the oven and made specifically for you!"

Robin gulped. Inside the basket lay another one of Sumia's pies. It looked just as pretty and delicious as the last one. Until now, Robin didn't notice the mouth-watering aura coming from the basket. Now that he did, his mouth started salivating uncontrollably.

"S-Sumia. I…I don't know what to say. You honor and flatter me by giving me another one of your amazing and tasty and delicious pies! You said you baked this specifically for me?"

"That I did! After all, you very kindly agreed to be my official taste tester, did you not?"

"I did, didn't I? And can I just say that was possibly the greatest decision I made in my life. Your pie smells soooooooooooo good!"

Sumia smiled. "I'm glad. And…well…um…"

Robin tore his gaze from the pie. "What's wrong?"

The pegasus knight shifted uncomfortably. "I also wanted so apologize for not taking part in that last skirmish against the Risen. I-I thought that if I saw how the more experienced Shepherds fought, I could learn a few things myself. And I didn't want to get in the way of our first combat mission. I'm sorry."

"Aw, come now, Sumia. Don't be so hard on yourself. If you felt the time wasn't right for you, then it wasn't right. It's always better to sit back and watch rather than rush out recklessly. Heck, that skirmish was actually pretty tough! You saw how many of us needed patching up afterwards? I don't think I could've forgiven myself if you, knowing that you weren't ready, fought with us and got hurt, or worse."

"Really? You're not angry? Or disappointed?"

"No and no. In fact, I'm quite proud."

"Proud?"

"Yep! It takes courage to admit that you aren't ready and to sit back. You know your limits and want to improve before fighting for real. I respect that."

"Oh wow. I never thought of it that way…" Sumia was quiet for a moment before looking up with renewed energy. "Thank you, Robin. You always have a way of making me feel better."

"Another one of my gifts, apparently. Heh. Maybe after all this is said and done, I could start giving motivational speeches around Ylisse."

"Hee hee. If you do, I'll attend every one!

"It would be nice to have a friendly face in the audience." Robin chuckled. "I'd love to sit and chat with you all day Sumia, but I feel that your pie is getting cold out here. I must withdraw to my tent and enjoy its flavor in private. Only then can I truly articulate my thoughts and give you my report. But judging from the smell alone, I can already tell it's going to be great! Is it raspberry? No, apple! Cherry?"

Sumia laughed. "Cherry. You're always so dramatic when it comes to pie, Robin. I'll be waiting for your final judgement. It should be better since it only took me seven tries this time! Now, I think I'll train a little bit and try my hand at other flavors."

"It's not dramatic, it's being honest! I cannot stress that enough. And only for your pies, Sumia."

Robin waved goodbye to the pegasus knight and quickly made his way back to his tent. He didn't stop for nothing. Not when people tried to talk to him. Not when a pile of crates blocked his path. Not even when he almost ran into Frederick. Nothing was going to stop Robin from getting to his tent and enjoying the deliciousness of Sumia's pie!

Once safely inside his then, Robin made preparations. He pushed all of the papers off his (pitifully tiny) desk, carefully took the pie out of the basket, placed it on the desk, took the good cutlery out of his coat, wrapped a napkin around his neck, cut a slice and prepared his taste buds for another glorious trip into-

"Um, Robin? Are you there?"

-Only to freeze, holding the slice of pie a few inches from his mouth. Typical. This was just so godsdamned typical! Something always came up just when he was about to do something he enjoyed. It was always "Robin! Our scouts have seen new enemy activity on the horizon and here's the written report…in triplicate" just when he was about to have dinner/lunch/breakfast, or "Robin! Emergency strategy meeting, pronto!" when he was getting ready for bed or, worst of all, "I'm sorry sir, the price of this Arcthunder tome has just increased a hundred percent" when he was seconds away from buying said Arcthunder tome! Robin wondered why it was always bad news and always when he was about to relax. Why could it never be good news? Why wasn't it ever "Robin, you'll never believe it! That massive horde of enemies in front of us all died of dysentery!" or "Thank you so much for saving our sorry hides! Why don't you help yourself to this stash of ancient and powerful magic tomes that we just happen to have in our possession"?

But alas, the world was cruel and liked to see Robin suffer (or work himself silly). That brought his thoughts back to his current predicament. He was seconds away from enjoying (yet another) delicious pie sent from the heavens. But there was also someone at his tent, probably in need of assistance of some sort. What was he to do? What was more important? The most delicious smelling, mind blowing and mouth-watering pie sitting right in front of him or someone in need of help? Well, that was a dumb question with a very clear answer. But Robin was a tactician first and an enjoyer of pies…not first, but it was high up there! So with a heavy sigh, he put the pie back in its basket and tried to focus on whoever it was who came to see him and not on the thing he would much rather be eating.

"Yes, come in."

A knight in green armor walked in.

"You're Stahl, correct?"

"That's right."

"Come in and take a seat."

Stahl looked around Robin's tent. "There, uh, don't seem to be any more chairs."

Robin looked around his tent. "Huh. You appear to be correct. I could've sworn I brought another chair in here. Eh, no matter. We're right next to the supply tent anyway. I'm sure there's some spare chairs there."

"Alright. Be right back."

Stahl left and returned to Robin's tent a few seconds later. "Where should I put it?"

"Put what?"

"The chair?...That you made me get?"

"Hmm? Oh right! I totally remembered what I did with the other chair I brought it! Turns out this tent has only so much space and between my sleeping area, my desk, that corner where I keep my weapons and all the paperwork I have, there's only enough room for one chair. That's the one I'm sitting in, if you're wondering. So, I guess I'm saying that you've been demoted to stool. I'm sure the supply tent has plenty of those too."

Stahl blinked. "Uh, alright. I'll get a stool then."

The slightly confused knight left and returned a few seconds later holding a stool.

Robin smiled. "Wonderful! Now just put in over here where there's no papers lying around and we can get started."

"Okay." Stahl did as he was instructed. "Incidentally, why do you have so many papers in here?"

Robin opened his mouth to answer before stopping. He then thought for a moment. "You know what? I'm not entirely sure. Before it was just reports and battle tactics. I drafted a few plans and kept them around just in case, you know? Then things kinda spiralled and before I knew it, all the useless papers got mixed up with the important papers and now I can't really tell where anything is anymore!"

Stahl was confused at how cheerily the tactician answered. "Not to sound disrespectful, but doesn't it bother you how… disorganized it is in here? It must be difficult to find what documents you need."

"Oh, it drives me nuts! Yesterday, I tried doing a bit of organizing. I ended up finding most of the papers relevant to the previous battle. I even stacked them up in a nice pile too! Put it in a corner and everything. The good news was that I had an organized pile of documents. The bad news was that it took a day of wadding though all the papers in here. Of course, by then a bunch of new reports, updates and other things came in and new strategies had to be drafted. When I was done, it was back to square one. Well, square negative one since there was more new paperwork than there was organized paperwork."

Robin grinned. Stahl stared.

"Don't give me that look! If you must know, I take care of the important stuff in the command tent. There, things are neatly organized in piles and structured according to type of file, date created and future use."

"Wow, that's quite impressive. But how you get from that to…"

"This unholy mess that's in my tent? A good question! The answer is thus: I have a system by which I do my paper related things. I can draft and organize anything into a neat, clean pile at the end of the day. All I require is a chair, writing utensils and a proper desk. As you can see, I have most of those things." Robin pointed to his desk. "THIS is the problem. With so little space, the system breaks down. I can't shuffle papers and keep multiple piles. I can't push documents that aren't important away and focus on the ones that require immediate attention. When I do, everything falls on the floor! When I try to things up, more things end up on my desk and on the floor and sometimes the ink spills and I have barely enough space to keep my quills and I don't even know where to keep the candle and I CANNOT WORK IN THESE CONDITIONS!"

Robin paused, took a few deep breaths after his outburst and tried to calm down. "I'm sorry about that. Just thinking about it makes me a little frustrated."

Stahl remained silent. After a few moments, he cleared his throat. "If this bothers you so much, wouldn't it be easier to just…buy a desk for yourself?"

"Stahl, do you know nothing about life? That's the obvious and easy way out. And since life hates the obvious and easy way out, it's impossible. I've checked our accounts. All of our money goes on new training equipment and weapon upkeep. Since we're not bandits, we can't just raid and pillage every village and merchant we come across. And unless our enemies start crapping gold when they die, we're stuck in our current financial situation. Besides, it isn't all bad. The command tent has a desk and that's enough, right?"

"I guess?"

"That's the spirit! But enough about me. Let's talk about you. What do you need?"

"Oh, right. I initially came to talk to you about the after action report and my performance."

Robin looked confused. "The what, now?"

"You know. Where you write down how each Shepherd did in the last battle, areas of strength, things that need improvement, suggestions and all that?"

"Hmm, you mean the OPERA?

It was Stahl's turn to look confused. "Opera? I personally prefer the orchestra but I'm not sure what that's got to do with my combat assessment."

"No, not 'opera', OPERA. You know? My Observation Performance Evaluation Results Assessment? OPERA. But 'After Action Report' does sound better. More official. So that's what we're calling it from now on! Thanks Stahl."

"Um, you're welcome?"

"Right, now where did I put that thing?" Robin started rummaging through all the papers on his desk and floor. "Requisition papers…inventory…*Anna's Amazing Commodities Weekly*….shopping list…weather report…*Desk Magazine Monthly*…Bear with me here, Stahl. I know I have that thing here somewhere…"

As the tactician was busy sifting through the sea of papers around him, Stahl picked up on something. It was a smell. But not any smell, it was something sweet, tasty and absolutely heavenly! It was food! And judging from how good it smelled, it was probably very, very, good. He just had to find out what it was.

"Robin, do you smell that?"

"Smell what? The only thing I can smell is paper an-hey! My *Apocalypse Contingency Plans A to F*! I'd wondered where this thing went off to. Awesome! Now if only I could find the M to T draft. Or the Z edition, I suppose, since Risen are zombies…I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"Really? Don't you smell it? The scent of some delicious food. Judging from the smell, I'd say it's a…baked good. A pie, to be exact. Smells like cherry. Or maybe grape. Blueberry?"

Robin stopped looking though his papers. He looked at Stahl, who was sniffing the air to determine what he was smelling. Robin then looked at his basket, where Sumia's pie was still sitting. Then to Stahl. Then back at the pie. Huh. Here he was facing yet another dilemma. On the one hand, he really, *really* liked Sumia's pies. On the other hand, here was Stahl, a fellow Shepherd and a friend, asking (or heading that way) for a piece of Sumia's (guaranteed delicious) pie. Was Robin a man who would refuse a friend's wish? Stahl was also probably hungry and-wait a minute.

Robin looked at the knight. "Stahl, you aren't hungry by any chance, are you?"

"Starving." As if to reinforce this point, Stahl's stomach gave a very audible growl.

"Didn't you *just* have lunch? Maybe less than an hour ago?"

"Yeah, but that was so long ago. Besides, that wasn't nearly enough to fill me up. I skipped breakfast today because no one told me about our expedition. So, technically, I'm missing lunch since the food that I ate before was there to replace breakfast."

"That's…Ok. Sure. Why not? If you're that worried about it, don't. Breakfast wasn't all that. Just pancakes with maple syrup, bread, butter, jam, eggs of all shapes and sizes…Mmmm. Now that think about it, breakfast was pretty damn good! Sorry you missed it."

Stahl groaned. "Man, that sounds sooo good! Now I feel even worse, and hungrier!"

"Hey, don't feel bad! Dinner's in, like…some hours! And you can always remember the meal we had in the capital to keep you satisfied. Gods it was good."

"Yeah, it sure was. We had a whole selection of meat to choose from. And the gravy was out of this world."

"It *was* good, wasn't it? Those royal chefs sure know what they're doing in there. The ham was especially tasty. I think I heard it was honey baked. And remember the dessert?"

"Oh gods. The fudge. So sweet. So good."

"Mmmm…fudge."

"Hey, you know what would great? Honey baked fudge."

"Or…fudge covered ham."

"Mmmmmm."

Both men became silent as the thoughts of various different foods ran through their minds. Robin noticed that the thoughts were actually making him hungry despite also having eaten lunch about an hour ago. He once again looked at Stahl. The knight had a faraway look in his eyes and a little drool coming out of his mouth. Robin then looked at his pie and made a decision. He really couldn't leave another appreciator of food hanging like that. Besides, the pie was getting colder the longer this thing lasted.

"Stahl?"

"Yes? What is it…giant…talking ham?"

Robin slowly slid back in his chair. "Hey now, I'm not a giant talking ham. I'm Robin. Your tactician and someone who wouldn't appreciate you trying to eat me."

Stahl shook his head and chuckled embarrassedly. "Heh, sorry Robin. Sometimes my thoughts get away from me."

"Don't worry about it. It happens to the best of us. Now, I have a solution to your little problem right here." Robin slowly took out the pie and put in on the table. "Tada! Feast your eyes and your stomach!"

And did he ever feast his eyes. The Stahl stared at the pie with wide eyes and an open mouth for a good minute or two. When the silence hit the three minute mark, Robin got impatient.

"Right. That's enough staring dumbly at the pie. Do you want some?"

Stahl's head shot up and he stared at the tactician. "A-are you sure? I can have some?"

"Of course." Robin cut a slice and handed it to Stahl. "Enjoy! I can guarantee you that it will be exquisite."

"Wow, thanks Robin!"

"I gotta warn you though, this pie is like a bomb."

"A bomb?"

"Yes, in that it will BLOW YOUR TASTEBUDS AWAY!"

"Oh, alright."

Both men then proceeded to bite into their pies. Robin let the taste engulf him. It was sweet, smooth and as delicious as he thought it would be. Then again, judging from the last one, Sumia sure had a knack for making amazing baked goods. That, or he just enjoyed pie more than the average person. Who knew? The important thing was that, judging by the look on his face, Stahl seemed to be enjoying the pie as much as Robin was.

When they both finished, Stahl sighed in contentment. "That was some good pie, Robin. Did you make it yourself?"

"Heh, I wish. Unfortunately I have not the culinary skills to make pies this good…I don't think. Having this 'amnesia' really doesn't do wonders for you, especially when it comes to the skills you think you should be able to do. Hmm, I should try my hand at cooking sometime! Imagine if I could re-create something this good. There would be pies forever!"

"Mm. If you want, I could always give you some tips."

Robin looked at Stahl incredulously. "You cook?"

"Yeah. Is it so surprising?"

"No…well, sort of. I just wasn't expecting it, I suppose. Thanks Stahl. When I have some free time and decide to try my hand at cooking, I'll let you know."

"Looking forward to it. Who knows? Maybe together, we'll unlock new recipes and make even greater tasting food."

"Heh, one can always dream. Now then, let me see if I can find the last battle report. I sense that I am close to finding it here…" Robin tossed a few papers and piles aside before suddenly clutching a piece of paper and waving it in the air.

"HA!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "I *knew* I had it in here! You never believed me but it's totally here! Read it and weep!"

Stahl looked around the tent. "Um, Robin? Who are you talking to?"

"Hmm? Oh…uh, you? Sorry, I get overly excited sometimes." Robin cleared his throat. "Now, let us go through your performance in the last battle." The tactician then flipped through his report while Stahl waited for some comment.

After a few minutes Robin put his report down and looked at the knight. "Stahl, according to this report, your performance isn't bad. But it's not amazing, either. It's…what's the word I'm looking for? The one that's in between mediocre and excellent. You know what I mean?"

Stahl sighed. "I think the word you're looking for is 'average.'"

"Yes! There you go! If I were to describe your performance in the last battle, it would be 'average'. Huh. Average all around. What are the chances?"

"Quite high, considering that it's me we're talking about."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, that's kind of my reputation around here. Somehow, whatever I do, I end up being completely unremarkable and average in it. In the middle ground, so to speak."

Robin looked quizzically at the knight. "That has to be an exaggeration. You can't possibly be average in everything."

Stahl shrugged. "It's true. Whether it be training, fighting, playing or heck, even looks! No matter how you look at it, I'm just your average, run-of-the-mill guy. Nothing special to sing about."

"I find that very hard to believe. You have to be above average at something! You just have to. What about cooking? You said you knew some stuff."

"I did. But even there, I'm hovering around 'good', but not 'great'."

"How can that be?"

"Well sure, I'm an alright cook. But when you have the likes of Sully, Chrom and Lissa for comparison, that really isn't saying much."

"I guess that's true. Haven't tried it myself, but I hear that Sully's cooking is considered a lethal weapon."

Stahl shivered. "Oh yeah. It can definitely be called that. My stomach hurts thinking about it."

"Right. Back to the topic at hand. You're telling me that you are completely and utterly average in all of your endeavours?"

"That's right."

"Totally normal. Not terrible, not adept, just plain average?"

"Yep."

"Interesting…" Robin looked thoughtful for a moment. He spoke again before Stahl could say anything. "You know, this could be very useful to us."

"Oh? How so?"

"You say you are apparently totally average at anything you do. Anything. This is clearly a fascinating field of potential usefulness, especially in the military sphere."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"If you are apparently immediately average at anything you do, does that mean that I can just give you a weapon and you'll just inherently know how to use it at a medium level?"

"I'm not sure that's really how-"

"I mean, you're a knight, sure. But if I were to give you a bow right now, would you just automatically know how to use it?"

"Um-"

"And not just a bow, what about tomes? If I were to give you a tome, would you be able to jump to El-level spells, skipping the basic ones altogether?"

"Well, I don't think-"

"Stahl! Do you know what you are?"

The knight stayed silent.

"You, my friend, are gifted. Gifted with the most extraordinary skill of being average at everything. Now we must use your amazing gift by weaponizing it. And by 'it', I mean you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. We will now have to test out my theory by giving you every weapon imaginable to how just how you handle yourself. That's right, from the simple sword, to magic tomes to siege weapons. Any and all weapons under the sun. If it can be used as a weapon, you'll be training with it."

"Um, Robin? Don't you think that's a little excessive?"

"Excessive? EXCESSIVE?! I do not know the meaning of the word! We're at war, Stahl. And our enemies? Hordes of undead abominations that somehow have weapons that completely outclass ours! We need any edge that we can get. Your perfectly average gift may be exactly what we need. The only thing left for us to do is see if my hypothesis is true. So enough chitchat. Go to the training grounds and await further instructions. I'll send someone along with every weapon in our inventory shortly. We'll then record your performance with each weapon and see just how average you are."

"But-"

"Ah! That's chitchat. I said enough of that. Off to the training grounds with you. Go. Go!"

Stahl looked like he was about to object before nodding and dejectedly heading out of Robin's tent. Meanwhile, the tactician was excitedly drafting up plans and making calculations about Stahl's potential. Not since Lissa revealed to him the amazing uses of rescue staves has Robin felt this excited. He had to find his latest inventory checklist and see what he could give to Stahl. Gods, Robin sure loved the feeling when a new avenue of tactics opened up to him. Of course, all good things come to an end. Some good things end sooner, rather than later. Robin's good feelings fall in this category because not five minutes after Stahl left, the tactician let out a frustrated growl and stormed out of his tent. He really did have to do something about the mess in there. Maybe stealing the table in the command tent wasn't such a bad idea after all. But that was a battle to be fought another day. Now, Robin felt like not thinking about it. Maybe he could go find and talk to Sumia. After all, he did promise to give her his final judgement on the pie.

Chapter 8: Miriel

Nothing stops the updates. Not life, sickness or even studies. Nothing!

In life, one must be prepared for anything. This is doubly true if you're a tactician and even more so if your name just happened to be Robin. Because if you're a tactician named Robin, you have probably seen more things in the past week or so than most people have in their lives. From raiding bandits, to strange sky portals, mysterious (and somewhat effeminate) masked swordsmen and surprisingly well-armed undead monsters, Robin thought he'd seen it all. To top it all off, Robin's job demanded that he foresee and plan for each and every possible situation, no matter how impossible or improbable. And Robin tried his best to do just that. Whether it was the Risen, bandits or some disaster that could occur due to the many eccentricities of his friends, Robin made sure that he had a plan in place, three contingency plans and a few contingency plans for the contingency plans (he subscribed to the theory that the only way to be prepared was to be crazily over prepared). Robin was ready for anything. He had plans ready for anything. He had backup plans ready for anything in case his main plans failed to account for something. He was certain that nothing could surprise him anymore. Of course, fate seemed determined to prove him wrong.

It started like any other day. Robin slowly woke up after another night of strategizing and coming up with a dozen scenarios which could or could not happen. It seemed like it would be a good day, Robin could sense it (the fact that he didn't dose off on his desk was already a good sign). So he got up, yawned, stretched and was ready to start the day.

The first thing that Robin saw that day was Chrom. That wasn't anything new. His friend usually burst into his tent to inform him about some urgent matter that's come up or something. Chrom usually had the courtesy to knock and ask permission to enter, but sometimes there wasn't enough time for such pleasantries. So it wasn't surprising that Robin found himself staring at his friend's face. What was surprising was that, aside from some strategically placed scales and Falchion, Chrom was completely and utterly naked. That was…new. As Robin rubbed his eyes to try to figure out if he was dreaming, he saw something else.

"What the…? 'Chrom Wants You!' I…huh?" However, before he could think about anything else, Chrom burst into the tent and, without looking around, tore the poster off the wall, then left as quickly as he came.

Robin spent a good five minutes staring dumbly at the now blank wall to try to figure out what the hell just happened. He looked around his tent. Everything looked the way he last remembered it, from the small corner with his weapons and coat to the knee-deep (well, that was something of an exaggeration. Ankle-deep would be more accurate) sea of papers lying on the floor. Robin then tried pinching himself. Yep, that still hurt, which meant that he was wide awake and in the real world. But if he was in the real world, what just happened? Robin thought and thought before eventually giving up and deciding that the events of the past few minutes never happened.

That turned out to be the correct course of action because everything afterwards made sense. Robin went about his daily routine without incident. He got up, got dressed, rinsed his face, brushed his teeth and went to get breakfast. It was when he got to the dining tent that things got weird again. Robin couldn't put his finger on it, but there was something… off about everyone. He felt as though they all knew something he didn't. On top of that, it seemed that there was always someone snickering somewhere about something. But when he looked back, it seemed that everyone was simply eating breakfast. Come to think of it, Robin couldn't see Chrom anywhere. Frederick too, for that matter. Huh. That was a bit strange. Chrom usually shows up for breakfast and Frederick…well, Frederick probably eats before the sun rises and only appears to ensure that Chrom doesn't get food poisoning or something. So him not being there made sense. No Chrom equals no Frederick. But then, why no Chrom?

"Robin! Over here!"

The tactician didn't have time to ponder the answer as he turned and saw Lissa waving at him. As he sat next to her, the princess smiled at him. "So, how was your morning?"

"Well, it was actual-" Robin started before pausing and looking at Lissa suspiciously. "Waait a minute, you never ask me how my morning is or how I'm doing without some sort of ulterior motive."

"Ulterior motive? Me? What ever gave you that idea?" Lissa asked innocently.

"Something called 'past experience'. The last time you wanted to know how I was doing, I ended up with a frog down my shirt! So you'll have to forgive me if I'm a bit on edge when you ask me innocent sounding questions."

"Oh, come on. You gotta admit, that *was* pretty funny!"

"IT WAS NOT FUNNY! It was cold and slimy and disgusting! I can still feel it crawling down my back sometimes." Robin shivered. "Eugh. A most unpleasant feeling."

"Wow. It really bothered you that much?"

Before Robin could make a sarcastic reply, another voice broke in. "Hello Robin, Lissa. Is this seat taken?"

"Oh, hey Sumia. Yes, please join us so that I may finally have a witness just in case this one here tries to pull anything funny or slip cold amphibians down my shirt."

"Um, okay? Thank you." The pegasus knight looked at Lissa for an explanation.

The princess shrugged. "Don't mind him. He's just being paranoid."

"It's not being paranoid if the paranoia is completely warranted!" retorted Robin.

"Anyway," Lissa decided to change the subject. "Have you guys seen *it*, this morning?"

"Seen what?" asked Robin while eating his breakfast.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," replied Sumia. "Today was just a normal morning with nothing out of the ordinary whatsoever. Nope. Nothing. At all."

Robin looked at her curiously while Lissa giggled. "Hee hee, sounds like someone knows what I'm talking about and is too embarrassed to admit it!"

"A-am not! I just…it's…I'm…" Sumia covered her increasingly red face with her hands.

"Aww, don't be ashamed Sumia. I'm sure that's a natural reaction to such an *artistic* interpretation of my brother!"

"What are you two talking about?"

Lissa stopped teasing Sumia and looked over at Robin. "You can't be serious."

"Serious about what?"

"You don't know what we're talking about?"

"Know what?"

"So you didn't see it?"

"See what?"

"Wow, you're really not joking. That's weird, I thought everyone got them."

"Got what?" Robin asked irritably. "I think that we've clearly established that I have no idea what's going on. Can someone please tell me what's happening?"

"It's great! You see-"

"Wait a minute!" Sumia interjected. "If Robin doesn't know, maybe it's for the best? It doesn't sound like something he should concern himself with and it'll save the captain's dignity if there's someone who doesn't know. So maybe we shouldn't tell him?"

"Maybe," Lissa pretended to consider Sumia's proposal. "But that's no fun. Besides, we've been talking about if for so long, I think Robin will explode if we don't tell him soon. He's also bound to find out eventually. Might as well be from us."

"But-"

"Would you rather he found out from Vaike?"

"No. I suppose not."

"So I'm guessing this has something to do with Chrom, then?" Robin asked.

"Oh yes," answered Lissa gleefully. "It seems that one overly zealous knight had decided that the Shepherds could use a

little morale raising. And to do this, he thought it would be a good idea to have posters put in every tent in camp."

"So? Good motivational posters are supposed to raise morale. I don't see what the big deal is."

"Oh, but this wasn't just any motivational poster," Lissa continued. "You see, Frederick thought that the best morale booster would be a nice stylized poster of our captain. Yes, a poster of Chrom, holding scales in one hand, Falchion in the other, and nothing else!"

Unable to hold it in any longer, Lissa burst out laughing.

Robin remained silent before speaking. "Wait, that's what this whole thing was about?"

"So you did see the poster?" Sumia asked, her face still a bit red.

"Yeah, I actually did. I guess that explains why Chrom burst into my tent and ripped that poster off the wall." Robin paused as a thought occurred. "Wait a minute, of all the things he could do to boost morale, *this* is what Frederick decides to do?!"

"W-what…do you mean?" Lissa managed to get out between bouts of laughter.

"I mean he took all that time and effort to go find an artist to paint a nude picture of Chrom, get those prints to a copy place, get gods know how many copies and place them all in every tent in camp! That probably took a bunch of money and time that could've otherwise been spent on more productive matters. Things like better equipment! Do you know what I could've done if we had better quality weapons, tomes and staves? It would've probably helped increase our survivability rate by a factor of at least two! Instead we get useless naked Chrom posters."

"Oh, don't be such a downer, Robin!" Lissa said as she finally calmed down. "Those posters are totally not useless."

"I vehemently disagree."

"Really? Because I feel my morale has been raised quite a bit. Are you telling me that this whole situation didn't make you chuckle just a little bit?"

Robin was about to answer before he stopped and thought about it. Before, he simply pretended that the whole incident in the morning never happened. But now that he thought about it and had all the facts, the whole situation was pretty ridiculous. It also raised questions. Why did Frederick decide that naked Chrom posters were the way to go? How did he even get the artist to paint Chrom? Did he get accurate measurements and if so, how? Robin then thought about Chrom's reaction. The thought of his friend running around camp, bursting into every tent and collecting these posters was pretty funny. No, it was very, very funny. The fact that every Shepherd must've seen them made it even better. Robin actually started laughing the longer he thought about it.

"Okay, you have a point there. Now that I've actually had a moment to think and digest this whole thing, my morale has definitely been raised."

"See?" said Lissa. "And the best part is that this will say with us forever and lighten the mood when we're down. Everybody wins!"

"Yep. And as Chrom's designated tactician and trusted friend, it is my solemn duty to make sure he never lives this down. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be off to do just that."

"Hey! No fair, as his younger sister, I get first dibs on making fun of him."

"Hmph. Fine, but make it quick. I've already come up with fiv-wait, six jokes. SIX!"

Sumia, who was sitting quietly all this time, decided to speak up. "Umm, do you two really need to do that? I mean, this situation is already embarrassing enough for the captain, do you really have to rub it in?"

"Yes." Robin answered unflinchingly.

"Absolutely." Lissa didn't even blink. "Our positions as little sister and friend practically demand it. Now, off I go to fulfil my sisterly duty!"

The two watched as Lissa cheerfully got up and left the dining tent in search for her brother. After a few seconds, Robin sighed.

"What's wrong?" Sumia asked.

"I just came up with three more jokes. That brings my total up to nine. But until Lissa gets back, I can't use them." Robin answered morosely before sighing again. "It's times like these I wish I was related to Chorm."

Sumia stared at him before giggling. "I suppose it's a good thing that you got your priorities straight. Do you think the captain is really going to let you get away with teasing him so?"

"Of course. He has no choice. Lissa is his kid sister so he can't really do anything there except take it. And me? I'm his friend and official tactician. That entitles me to make friendly jabs at him. Besides, what's he going to do? Fire me?" Robin laughed before pausing. "Well, theoretically he could fire me. But he won't. Do you know why?"

"Please, enlighten me."

"Firstly, Chrom isn't the type to fire his friends for something so dumb. Secondly, if he fires me, there's going to be no one left to handle the tactics making and paperwork filling. Those two are full-time jobs! Ones that I am particularity adept at, too. So, yeah. Those are the main reasons why Chrom won't fire me."

"Alright. Wait a minute, you said 'main reasons'. Are there other, lesser ones?"

"Yep. The list grows daily."

"You…you have a list?"

"I sure do! One of many, in fact. I like to keep lists so that I can pick up my train of thought from where it left off. But only of the important things like basic battle tactics, the ever changing inventory list, qualities of the ideal work desk, tips and tricks to mindless bliss, the roster, and other such things. Wanna see?"

"I…I think I'll pass." Sumia paused. "Do you really have a list on tips and tricks to mindless bliss?"

"My job can get very stressful sometimes." Robin answered seriously. "So it's nice to relax and think about nothing once in a while. The more ways to do that, the better."

"Oh, I see. That makes sense, I suppose."

"While we're on the topic of sense, why are you so formal?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Well, you call Chrom 'captain' and called me 'sir' when we met. What's up with that?"

"Is that so bad?"

"Not really, just a bit weird. I mean, Chrom isn't one for protocol. I actually think it makes him uncomfortable. Heck, he dissuaded me from formalities when I found out he was royalty! And me? People being formal to me is…weird. Being called 'Sir Robin' and stuff gives me a funny feeling. Weird funny, not 'ha ha' funny. Like I'm somehow different."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't know. I thought that Chrom is royalty, next in line for the throne and head of the Shepherds. I thought I needed to talk to, and about, him with all due respect. And he made you his second in command, with more authority than even Frederick. You two are possibly the highest ranking Shepherds, so I thought I should treat you as such."

"Well, yes and no. Yes, we probably are the highest ranking Shepherds, but no, that doesn't separate us from the rest of you. We're all more like friends who fight together. Everyone being equal and no special treatment. I mean, I don't think I have a higher rank or am more special than anyone. I'm sure Chrom feels the same way. Besides, we're now on a first name basis, right?"

"Oh, yes. Yes we are."

"There we go! And if I can be just 'Robin' to you, I'm sure Chrom can be just 'Chrom'. Trust me, it's better this way."

"Okay, thanks Robin. I trust your judgment."

"That's the spirit!" Robin wolfed down the remained of his breakfast and got up. "As always, it has been a pleasure talking with you, Sumia. However, I have now made up twenty Chrom related jokes and if I don't write them down I feel that the day would be wasted."

Sumia laughed. "Alright. I wouldn't want to keep you from your very important task. Thanks for the company, Robin."

"The pleasure is all mine, milady" replied Robin in his best Frederick impression, earning another laugh from the pegasus knight. He then bowed, waved goodbye and quickly made his way back to his tent.

Robin was just about to enter before he stopped himself. His tent was a mess. A bigger mess than it was before. Clearly less than ideal conditions for working and concentrating on the growing number of jokes he was coming up with. He needed a quiet and clean workspace to properly do this. And there was only one place in the entire camp (that Robin was aware of) that had those conditions.

So, Robin turned away from his tent and made his way toward the command tent. He usually reserved the command tent for work related matters, but this was technically a work related matter, raising the army's morale and stuff. That counted as work. Yes it did. It definitely did.

Having thus convinced himself, Robin confidently entered the command tent only to stop. Someone was in his workspace looking through his (very neatly organized) piles of documents. If he didn't know better, Robin would've thought that an enemy spy had infiltrated the camp and was now looking through all his battle plans. And they've decided to send what looked like a mage to do the spying. Well, that was laughably ridiculous. An enemy spy mage. Yeah righ- wait a minute. It was ridiculous…ridiculous enough to actually work! No one would suspect it because they would be too busy disbelieving it. It was the perfect crime! That, or Robin was overthinking things again. Either way, he approached with caution.

"Um, hello?"

The mage turned around. "Salutations, Robin. Might I assume that this is your workspace?"

Well that was unexpected. "Uh, hello. Yes that is my work space. Now who are you, how do you know who I am and what are you doing looking at my stuff?" Robin asked suspiciously.

The mage adjusted her glasses. "Ah, my apologies. I don't believe that I've properly introduced myself. I am Miriel. As for your other questions, permit me to answer."

"By all means."

"You are Robin, newly appointed tactician of the Shepherds. It is every Shepherd's duty to know his or her comrades. This is especially true for the one who will be ensuring our continued survival on the battlefield. Now, concerning my current activities, I was simply searching for one of my borrowed books when I noticed the systematized manner in which everything here is organized. It is quite impressive."

"Aw, really? Thanks! I try the best I ca-hey! Nice try, but you gotta get up pretty early in the morning to distract me. Now, let me see if I can confirm your statements." Robin reached into his sleeves and pulled out a piece of paper. "Let's just check this handy roster I've come up with, shall we? Hmm, ah! Miriel. Mage. Huh. It seems you're part of the Shepherds after all."

"That is correct."

"If that's the case, how do I know that you're rea-" Robin started to say before being interrupted by someone entering the tent.

"Heya Robin! Miriel."

"Vaike." Acknowledged the tactician. "So, you know Miriel, then."

"Sure do! Gotta thank you again, Miriel. If you hadn't given me my axe back, Teach woulda been in some trouble that last battle."

The mage frowned. "I can say with absolute certainty that you wouldn't simply 'be in some trouble'. You would be permanently indisposed. Honestly, I hope this serves as a lesson to you and that you not misplace your axe next time we are called for battle."

"Oh, come on! That was ONE time…that day. Teach ain't dumb enough to leave his trusty axe behind more than…it won't happen again! Probably."

Miriel sighed in irritation. Before Robin could say anything, another person entered the tent.

"Hey, Vaike! Come on! We're sparring again. I want to try out something."

"Gods' beards, Sully!" exclaimed Vaike. "Ya wanna spar again? I ain't saying no, but we've been goin' at it hard and fast lately. And a lot, too! What's goin' on?"

"Nothing. I just have to prove something to myself," replied Sully. "So, we going or what?"

"Har! The Vaike never turns down a challenge! Bring it!"

"That's what I like to hear! Let's take this to the training grounds." Sully greeted Robin and Miriel before leaving.

Once she was gone, Vaike smiled. "She says she's got somethin' to prove, but The Vaike knows that she's playin' hard to get. All that trainin' finally got her to see ol' Teach in a different light. All that's left now is for her to realize her feelings, know what I mean? Eh?"

Vaike nudged Robin in the ribs.

"Vaike, it you really forget your axe and go in without a weapon?" asked the tactician sternly.

"Um…I, well…"

"Vaike! Where' the hell are you?!"

"Coming, Sully! Sorry, can't talk. Sully calls. See ya!"

With that, Vaike quickly made his way out of the command tent.

"I'm going to have to have a very long talk with him." Robin muttered, frowning. He then turned to Miriel. "Looks like you're part of the Shepherds after all. My paranioa was misplaced."

"A healthy dose of caution of always preferable to the alternative."

"That's exactly my philosophy! Anyway, being a magic user, I probably already know what your strengths and weaknesses on the battlefield are. So there's no need for us to go into that. I would, however, like to get to know more about you and what you do around here."

"Very well. Is there anything specific you wish to know?"

"Maybe, but since we risk being interrupted by the others here, why don't we head on over to my tent. That should give us the privacy we need to conduct this interview."

"That proposal has merit. Lead the way."

As they both made their way out of the command tent and walked through the Shepherd's camp, Robin thought he might as well ask some questions while they walked.

"Sooo, what exactly do you do around here, Miriel?"

"When not preparing for combat, I read, perform experiments and investigate down various avenues of learning."

"Wow. So, scholarly pursuits, then?"

"Precisely."

"Interesting. So, doing this in your spare time, you must've done a lot of research. Did you ever get any prizes? Grants? Recognition?"

"I do not require any accolades. The pursuit of knowledge is its own reward."

"Huh. Have you made any earthshattering discoveries that would change our understanding of the world as we know it?"

"During the course of my investigations and research, I have come across several conclusions that do call into question some long established beliefs. However, I would not go as far as to say that my research has uncovered anything that would fundamentally change our understanding of the world around us."

"Oh. That's too bad. But your research did lead you to discover new things, yeah?"

"Not always, but yes. Investigating certain theories and hypotheses have led me to areas of study where I discovered methods of accomplishing certain tasks that were more effective than what we currently have. That, in turn, led me to

make some new inventions."

"Wow, really? I am a very big fan of doing things more efficiently. Do you think you could show me some of what came up with?"

"I would be more than happy to. Anything that benefits you also benefits us in combat and improves our overall efficiently and survivability."

"Great! Let's don't we discuss this more inside."

Robin pushed aside his tent flap and entered.

"Right, uh, sorry about the mess. I tried to clean up here but it all fell apart once the next batch of reports showed up. So I gave up. I do keep a stool though! Why don't you take a seat so that we can continue our discussion."

Robin looked back when he didn't hear an answer. "Miriel?"

The mage just stood there, breathing heavily and with a horrified expression on her face. It… was a bit disconcerting.

"Uh, Miriel? You alright? You don't look so good."

"Is this truly your…tent?"

"Yes."

"The area in which you reside, work and plan our movements?"

"Yes…"

"And you manage to carry out all your duties in such…squalor, unhindered?"

"Ye-uh. Define 'unhindered'".

Miriel stood there for a moment in silence before shaking her head. "Unacceptable. Simply unacceptable". She then started going around Robin's tent, picking up and sorting papers while the owner of said tent watched in confusion.

"Uh, Miriel? What are you doing?"

"Is it not obvious? I am trying to restore your tent to at least remotely resemble an organized work and living space. The fact that our tactician lives in such sordid conditions is simply unacceptable. It is also unfathomable that the person living here and the one who organized his workspace in the command tent in such an efficient manner are one and the same. Something clearly needs to be done."

"Well, yes, but-"

"I am now going to have to ask you to vacate the premises."

Robin blinked in confusion. "You're what? Why?"

"In order for me to properly and effectively restore this area to maximum operational efficiency, I require no distractions. Your presence here while I undertake this important task could serve as a potential distraction."

"But…it's my tent."

"Yes, and you clearly have not been able to take adequate care of it. I am going to need all my concentration and quite a significant portion of the day to bring order to this level of disarray. Now, if you'll excuse me…"

Before Robin knew what was happening, he found himself standing outside his tent. Miriel had closed the flaps and even hung his 'do not disturb under any circumstances' sign outside (Robin wasn't even aware he had one of those).

"What just happened? Did I just get kicked out of my own tent?" Robin was about to re-enter and argue with Miriel before reconsidering. "Eh, this isn't close to the weirdest thing that's happened to me in the past 24 hours. Besides, free tent cleaning, I guess. Well, time to find something to do."

And find something to do he did. During the day, Robin trained, talked with the others and did some reading on this 'Regna Ferox' place that they were going off to. It sounded…cold. Robin definitely didn't like the sound of that. He made a

note to buy more blankets, coats and other winter supplies. He also drafted a few more battle plans, finally found Chrom and put some of his jokes to good use (much to his friend's embarrassment) and spent some time intensely thinking about nothing. It proved to be quite a productive day.

By the time Robin returned to his tent to check up on Miriel, the sun had already set and some of the Shepherds were preparing to call it a day. All the while, the mage had spent the entire day in his tent, doing gods knew what. Robin checked on her several times, but she constantly shooed him away. She didn't even open the tent flaps so Robin had no idea how she was doing or what state his tent was in. It started getting worrisome when she didn't show up for lunch or dinner. Robin was glad he had foresaw this possibility and left her portions outside his tent. At least he knew she was eating, as evidenced by the dishes being empty next time he returned.

However, it was now getting late and Robin was starting to get more concerned. They were approaching Regna Ferox and he needed to sit and plan in the privacy of his own tent. He also needed to sleep, as did she. How long was she planning on doing this, anyway? So, standing outside his tent, Robin took a deep breath and called out.

"Miriel? It's getting late and you haven't come out of the tent once. I think whatever it is that you're doing can wait until tomorrow."

"That won't be necessary." Miriel replied.

"Wait, really?"

"Yes. I have accomplished everything that I have set out to do in the morning."

"Wow, that's impressive. Can I come in and see?"

"By all means."

Robin had a vague idea of what to expect when he entered the tent. What he found exceeded all of his expectations and totally blew him away. The fact that he could see the ground and the neatly organized piles of documents in the corner were all to be expected (but impressive, considering how many papers were laying on the floor before). But that's not what blew Robin's mind. What he was totally and completely not ready for was finding a work table in the middle of his tent. Sure, it wasn't the big, spacious desk he had back in Ylisstol, but it was definitely an improvement over what he originally had. It was big enough to fit into his tent without taking up all the space, it looked sturdy, it had space for him to work on, space to set aside documents of lesser importance and even a small shelf!

Robin spent a few minutes gawking and trying to form a coherent sentence. However, all he managed was a startled "How?"

Miriel simply shrugged. "With enough determination and diligence, even the most impossible seeming tasks are made possible. As you can see, I have organized all of your documents and put them in their own piles according to importance and relevance. All documents that were deemed unimportant were properly disposed of. I have also taken the liberty of replacing that sad excuse for a work desk with something more fitting."

"But, how..."

"Have I managed to place this seemingly large piece of furniture into your tent? Allow me to answer your question with a demonstration." Miriel said before snapping her fingers.

Robin watched in amazement as the desk collapsed and folded itself, reducing it to half its overall size. He then looked at the mage of an explanation.

"This is simply something I created while I was conducting my investigations. I have noticed that we will be spending a great deal of our time moving, establishing our camp only for short durations before dismantling it and moving on. In such circumstances, one cannot simply carry a heavy piece of furniture such as a proper desk without it becoming a significant inconvenience. However, we still do require a suitable space on which to write our movements, findings and other such materials. Thus, I have created this. By taking a common table, attaching a small shelf for the sake of convenience, making a few modifications to its general structure and casting a few simple spells, I have fashioned a spacious, effective, yet compact and portable, work table."

Robin had to fight to restrain the tears that were threatening to fall. "Gods, Miriel. I feel that a simple 'thank you' will not be enough to properly convey my gratitude. Do you know how long I struggled to work here and find a proper place to work? And now, with you giving me the greatest gift of all. I…this is just so overwhelming!"

"Your gratitude is noted and appreciated. I am happy to assist and contribute to increasing the effectiveness of the

Shepherds. On that note, I have a few more things that I would like to give you."

"You mean there's more?"

"Of course. During my organization of your tent, I've noticed a few areas that could be optimized for maximum efficiency. I have some items here that will help you achieve just that." Miriel handed Robin two items. "The item in your right hand is a miniaturized clock that can fit in your pocket. It will aid you in keeping track of the time so you can plan your day accordingly. The item in your left hand is a writing utensil. I have filled a small tube with ink and inserted it into a case. Applying pressure shall push out the ink, allowing you to write while also eliminating the need to constantly dip it in ink. I trust you find these items satisfactory?"

Robin took a moment to look at the items in his hands, then to Miriel. "Where did you find these things?" he finally managed to ask.

"I did not find anything. All these items are of my own creation." Miriel replied.

"So you just…made these?"

"Yes."

"And now you're just giving them to me? No strings attached? Just like that?"

"That is my intent, yes. I assume you have no objections?"

"Objections? Gods, when was the last time I got something so helpful for absolutely nothing?" Robin laughed incredulously. "No, Miriel. I have absolutely no objections whatsoever. I don't think I can ever thank you enough! All these things you've given me today, do you have any idea how much you've done? All this stuff is probably going to help me get through my daily paperwork twice as fast!"

"By my calculations, your operational efficiency should increase by at least 113.35 percent. However, these calculations are currently only rudimentary."

"You actually calculated how much more effic-you know what, never mind. Thank you, Miriel. Thank you a thousand times over. I greatly appreciate everything you've done today."

"Think nothing of it. I am happy to assist. Can I now assume that you can maintain your tent to the standard that you maintain your workspace in the command tent?"

"With the tools you've given me? No problem!"

"Excellent. Now, if you'll excuse me. I have devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to today's endeavour and now find myself quite exhausted. It's time I retired."

"Oh, of course. Don't let me keep you." Robin stepped out of the way. "Thanks again, Miriel! Good night."

"You as well, Robin." Replied the mage as she left.

Once she was gone, Robin looked around at his tent and sighed in contentment. Gods, everything was so neat and organized. It actually made him feel at ease. Before, he felt like a sailor trapped in the stormy sea with no way out. The mess in his tent always in the back of his mind and his tiny desk at the forefront of this thoughts. But now, everything was as he imagined it should be. The portable clock was really handy and Miriel's new-fangled writing utensil was like something sent from the heavenly office of stationary itself. But the compact magic desk was really something.

Robin walked up, snapped his fingers and watched with delight as the desk reassembled itself. Gods, he finally had a proper desk to work at. And on top of that, he had a brand new office desk waiting for him when this whole diplomatic mission to Ferox was over and done with. The thought of it made Robin giddy with excitement. He felt as though it was his birthday and he got some of the best presents around. Now all he needed to do was put all his stuff to use. And he would…tomorrow. Because today was already pretty much over and Robin felt sleepy. Now, he will have the first good night's sleep since they've set out. And today, he wouldn't be dreaming about stormy seas of unorganized papers. No, today he shall dream about orderly office ships sailing through calm seas of organized documents.

Chapter 9: Kellam

Man, I feel that these chapters are getting longer the further on we go. That's a good thing, right?

Thank you to everyone who took the time to leave a review. Glad that I got at least a chuckle out of you guys! Must be doing something right.

Sumia was nervous. She had a very bad feeling about what was going to happen. Being Sumia, her instincts when bad things were about to happen (mostly to her) were, unfortunately, mostly correct. This time was no different, except for the fact that she wasn't about to hurt herself tripping over nothing. No, but it was probably a lot worse. At least when she tripped over, she usually ended up hurting only herself. Now, there was a chance her carelessness got others hurt. And worst of all, she disappointed the one man who put so much faith into her. The same man who was sitting right across the table.

Ever since she entered and sat down, Robin was busy reading the after action report from their latest battle. Worryingly for Sumia, he was doing so with a very stern expression on his face and said very little. Those were definitely not good signs. Sumia thought she should say something. Apologize profusely for her failings, plead with him to not relegate her to the back, try to convince him she would do better next time. Anything. However, she couldn't. Robin seemed to be deep in thought and breaking the – admittedly uncomfortable – silence would do nothing to endear him to her. So, Sumia just waited and prayed that things would not be as bad as she thought they were (they usually weren't. They were worse).

After few more minutes of agonizing silence, Robin finally looked up from his notes.

"Sumia, do you know why I called you here?" he asked, with a serious tone and a blank expression.

"I have an inkling." Sumia replied morosely.

And she thought it was going so well, too! Her first combat mission. She finally got the courage to do more than sit back and watch how the others fought. She saddled that pegasus they found in the field, grabbed a lance, let Robin's words give her confidence, and finally took to the field. Of course it was scary, the Feroxi border guards attacking them was wholly unexpected. However, when she saw that her friends were in danger, Sumia steeled herself and finally managed to be useful. She swooped in and saved Chrom, when and did exactly what Robin told her to and even ferried the tactician around the battlefield. After the battle, she was happy and full of excitement. Finally, she made herself useful. Finally, she showed that she could do more than trip over nothing and make high quality baked goods. All these thoughts raced through her mind as she sought out Robin to thank him for all his words of encouragement. However, all her confidence disappeared as soon as Robin asked her to see him in his tent for a debriefing. That was it. He asked calmly and simply. No exclamations, no strange facts or confusing analogies, nothing. It was then and there that Sumia knew she royally screwed up.

"Alright, so I'll just say it to you straight."

Robin's voice brought her back to the present.

"The reason I asked you here…"

Oh no! Here it comes. Sumia closed her eyes and braced herself.

"…is to congratulate you on your outstanding performance in that last battle."

Oh, I knew it! I'm useless! I screwed up and now Robin has to tell me that I-wait.

Sumia was sure she misheard. Slowly opening her eyes, she risked looking at the tactician. "I'm sorry, Robin, I don't think I heard you right. What did you say?"

"Nope. You heard right." The tactician smiled. "Congratulations on an excellent job well done. We couldn't have done it without you."

Sumia didn't know what to do or what to think. All the signs pointed to this being bad news. Never in a million years did she expect praise! Quite high praise, too. She wanted to ask a multitude of questions. Was this really happening? Was she dreaming? What did she do? Was Robin just saying this to make her feel better? He wouldn't do that, would he?

Having so many questions whizzing though her mind, Sumia grabbed one at random. "W-why?"

"Are you kidding? You pulled off some amazing feats in that battle and helped us out of some difficult situations. Let's see now, you flew in and – may I add, very heroically – saved our hapless Exalt apparent from becoming Schwiss cheese when the battle started. That's a pretty big accomplishment already. Then, you fulfilled a crucial role by letting me tag along and direct the battle from the air. It's much more efficient when I have a bird's eye view of the battlefield. I can also pick off our enemies from the air. That's always fun. Furthermore, you harassed the enemy from the air and saved our skins when you took out the guards shooting at us while we worked the door. Finally, your speed allowed you strike and dodge any counterattacks. In turn, this distracted the enemy long enough for others to strike them down. Good stuff. So, you saved our captain, allowed me to better direct the battle and fulfilled many key roles on the battlefield. Very impressive considering it's your first sortie."

Sumia listened to Robin with rapt attentinon. "Wow. I…I didn't know I did so much…"

Robin chuckled. "You did that and more. We're all very proud of you."

"Robin, I…I wanted t-to sa-say…" Sumia stammered before she suddenly started crying.

Her reaction caught the tactician off guard. He quickly ran by her side. "Oh gods, Sumia! What's wrong?! Was it something I said? I'm so sorry! I don't even know what to do. Gods! Crying women make me very uncomfortable. Oh, I know! Here, why don't you stay here while I go and fetch…uh….someone!"

"I-I'm n-not crying b-because I-I'm sad…" Sumia managed so say between sobs.

"What? You're not? Then wh-GAH!"

Robin didn't have time to finish his sentence as Sumia suddenly shot up and hugged him tightly.

"I'm j-just so happy, Robin! A-all the things you s-said just make me f-feel so…so…" she managed to say before once again bursting into tears.

"Ack! Sumia…hugging…in…armor…crushing chest...consciousness…fading…"

"Huh? Oh! I'm so sorry!" The pegasus knight immediately let go of the hapless tactician, who promptly fell on the floor. "Robin, are you alright?!"

"Urg, I'll be fine. Just…need…to breathe." Replied the tactician as reached into his coat and pulled out a handkerchief. "Something to dry your tears?"

"Robin, this is no time to joke around!"

"Who's joking? I'll be fine. Just…leave me on the ground here for a sec. You, on the other hand, have cried your eyes out and have nothing to wipe away your tears. I can't stand them staining your pretty face. So, I'm offering you this handkerchief to dry the aforementioned tears. Take it?"

"I-I don't know if you're being serious or just trying to stop me from crying more." Sumia half laughed and half sobbed. "Thank you, Robin."

"No problem. I'm here to help!"

As Sumia wiped away her tears and blew her nose, the tactician slowly stood up. He took a few deep breaths before speaking.

"Right. Okay, breathing back to normal and chest no longer constricted. Feeling great! Man Sumia, when you show your gratitude, it's no joke!"

"I'm so sorry, Robin! It's just that you said so many nice things and made me feel like I made a difference and I just couldn't control myself because I felt so happy and-"

"Hey now, none of that! This is supposed to be a happy occasion. No more apologies and regrets. I'm fine and you did a great job out there today. Let's concentrate on that."

Sumia smiled broadly and wiped away a few more tears that were threatening to fall. "I…thank you, Robin. For everything."

"I didn't do anything, Sumia. Today, it was all you."

The pegasus knight shook her head. "No, not just for today. Thank you for all of your encouraging words and believing in

me even when I didn't believe in myself. If it were not for you, I don't think I'd ever have the courage or confidence that I had today. I owe it all to you."

"Aww, Sumia! You're making me blush with your compliments!" Robin joked before clearing his throat. "As much as I'd love to continue this conversation, I still have a few more Shepherds to debrief. Unfortunately, that means I am now going to have to politely ask you to leave."

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry to have taken so much of your time."

"It's no problem at all. You're always welcome here, Sumia. And I meant every word I said today. I look forward to seeing what you are capable of in the future."

The pegasus knight gave him a bright smile. "Thank you, Robin. I promise that I won't let you down! In fact, I'm going to train right now!"

Robin laughed quietly as Sumia left his tent with a spring in her step and a fiery determination in her eyes. Of course, being Sumia, Robin couldn't say he was too surprised when he heard her gasp followed by a thud. Before he could say anything, Robin heard another voice.

"Milady, are you alright?"

"Oww…oh, hi Frederick! Yes, I'm fine. A little fall won't put me down. Especially today! Now, I'm off to train. See you later!"

"Err…well, yes. Farwell."

Robin heard Sumia's footsteps disappearing into the distance. When nothing happened for a few minutes afterwards, he sighed.

"Come on Frederick, I know you're out there. I have something I need your opinion on." He paused before adding "And don't be afraid, I'm not going to make you eat bear and throw up your guts again. So will you just man up get yourself in here?!"

That seemed to do it as the knight entered the tent immediately.

"Robin, I am neither afraid nor am I nervous about you tricking me into eating bear meat again. I was simply watching over Sumia just in case she trips over something."

"Yeah, sure you were. How goes the aversion therapy, by the way? Are you slowly managing to eat your way up the game meat ladder?"

"It goes surprisingly well. After the time you made me eat bear and I thought I was dying, your method of slowly getting used to lesser meats seems to be paying off. I am now able to eat mutton without any difficulty."

"That's great! See? I do have your best interests at heat. My methods may need some refining here and there, but the end result is all that matters."

"Yes, I suppose so. And a bit of hardship is to be expected on the road to self-improvement."

"That's the spirit! So, I take it you're no longer angry at me for the jerky incident? "

"I can safely say that I am not."

"Wonderful! So…does that mean I don't have to show up for your weekly morning runs?"

"Absolutely not."

"Aww, why not?"

"The weekly pre-morning runs are an essential part of each Shepherd's training regimen. It improves both your body and your mind."

"Really? Because before those runs, my mind wants to sleep and my body feels peaceful. Afterward, I feel like I'm going to die. Give me a break here, Frederick! I'm helping you overcome your bear meat thing, can't I be excused out of this thing?"

"I'm afraid not, Robin. This is mandatory and essential training. Besides, as you are helping me with my aversion to

game meat, so too shall I help you overcome your physical tiredness and exhaustion. I fact, I'm going to start right now: you now have supplementary training sessions in the morning."

Robin stared at Frederick in horror. "Why? W-w-w-w-why? Why would you do this to me, Frederick? Why? Are you purposely trying to kill me? That's it, isn't it?! This is your revenge for the jerky incident!"

"Robin, please. Holding grudges for such things is both petty and childish. I am simply helping you overcome a crucial weakness. I've noticed that you're at your weakest in the morning. Having more exercises then shall slowly make your body adapt and function so that you can work even in the earliest mornings."

Instead of saying anything, the tactician just slammed his head on his desk. "Urgh, Frederick, I think a part of me just died and the rest will soon follow. Just note that if my battlefield tactics suffer because of exhaustion, it's all your fault."

"Fear not, Robin. I do realize your importance to this army and your state of mind when drafting plans. Thus, your training sessions shall not be too early and will supplement your other early sessions. Not too intrusive, wouldn't you say?"

A groan.

Frederick smiled. "Good! I'm glad that we agree. Now, was there anything else?"

Another groan. However, the tactician did slowly lift his head off his table. "Yeah. Yeah, I did," he grumbled. After taking a deep breath, Robin calmed himself. "It's important. Frederick, you're an experienced knight with years of combat and service to Ylisse, yes?"

"You already know the answer to that question, Robin."

"Right, well as a seasoned and experienced knight of Ylisse, I need your opinion on something."

"I'll do my best to you a balanced and professional answer."

"Good. Now, what do you think of Sumia?"

Frederick blinked. "Sumia?"

"Yes, Sumia." Robin said seriously. "As you may have noticed, today was her debut as a frontline soldier. Now, while she may have displayed her skills in battle, I have noticed some areas where she is lacking. However, I would like a second opinion just to make sure that I've got my facts straight. So, would you be kind enough to share your observations with me?"

"Ah, that's what you mean. Very well." Frederick cleared his throat. "Sumia has shown great skill in combat today. Being a pegasus knight, she has the advantage of speed and movement. Those are her biggest assets. With her flight and maneuverability, she makes an effective scout and thus allows us to get more accurate reports. This also makes it more difficult, if not impossible, for her enemies to hit her if they do not have projectile weapons. Furthermore, being much faster than the average soldier, her speed allows her to strike enemies multiple times and withdraw before they are able to retaliate as well as dodge most incoming enemy attacks."

Robin nodded but otherwise remained silent.

"However," continued Frederick. "Sumia does have some rather serious flaws. She, as all flyers, is particularly vulnerable against archers and wind magic. It could be doubly dangerous depending on the high at which she gets hit. A simply arrow wound could result in serious injury if she gets knocked off her mount at higher altitudes. Furthermore, while Sumia is very agile and can avoid most enemy attacks, she lacks defense. If she were to get hit, she would take it worse than other Shepherds. Finally, while Sumia is eager and determined, I've noticed that she lacks strength. During our last battle, most of her attacks injured the enemy, but were not enough to take them down. In every instance, it was up to another Shepherd to deliver the finishing blow. The only time she successfully took down an opponent unaided was when they were already injured."

"...And these are your professional observations?"

"They are."

Robin sighed. "I was afraid of that."

"You have come to the same conclusions, then?"

"I have. But I wanted to have a second opinion to be absolutely sure. Thank you, Frederick. I now know what I must do."

"Anything to help. Is that all?"

"Ye-wait, no. Your report changes my battle plans quite a bit. To keep us at maximum efficiency, I have a favor to ask of you. Well, a favor or an assignment, depending on your point of view."

"I will do everything in my power to fulfill it. What is it you need me to do?"

"I need you to look after Sumia for me."

The knight quirked an eyebrow. "Robin?"

"See, the way I see it, Suima is clearly very skilled and eager to show off her capabilities. Being our only flyer, I already see that she's going to see a lot of combat and other missions. However, no matter how much she wants to prove herself or how much I think she is capable of, the fact of the matter is that she's still green. Today made that very obvious. Of course, with time, she'll learn from her mistakes and fight with the best of us. But now, she needs someone to look after her on the battlefield to make sure her mistakes don't get her killed. I have decided to take this responsibility myself, but I cannot do so for every battle. While riding with her in the air does provide tactical advantages, there will be circumstances that demand that I be elsewhere. In such cases, I want you to take my place, Frederick. You're a veteran knight with experience and know the ropes. You are also nigh unkillable. I think these qualities make you the best candidate to fight alongside Sumia when I am unavailable. Can you do this for me?"

"Of course, Robin. Nothing shall happen to Sumia as long as I draw breath!" declared Frederick.

The tactician smiled. "That's what I like to hear. Thanks, Frederick. But don't worry. Unless something crazy happens like, I dunno, a full scale war breaking out or someting, I don't see us switching roles in the near future. As long as it's just these little skirmishes, we'll be just fine as we are now. This was more of a heads up, just in case."

"Very well. Thank you for the advance warning, Robin. Now, is there anything else?"

"No, that was it. Thanks, Frederick."

"You're welcome. Now, I'll be off to collect some firewood. I also expect to see you early tomorrow for your supplementary morning training."

Robin's face immediately fell. "Yeah, sure. Great. Now get out."

The knight chuckled and did just that. Despite what Frederick said, Robin was still sure that this was revenge for the jerky stunt. He was definitely not a morning person and no amount of training was going to fix that, especially as he spent his time drafting strategies late into the night on a regular basis. He was going to have to find a way to wiggle out of this…

"Robin? You said that you required my assistance with a matter of great import. Permit me to enter."

"Hmm? Oh yes, please do."

Miriel entered his tent and immediately started examining the interior.

"Hello, Miriel. Looking for something?"

"Greetings and salutations, Robin. No, I was simply noting the condition of your tent since last I saw it. It pleases me to see that its condition has not deteriorated."

Robin chuckled. "Of course. After all the work you put into cleaning it, I really couldn't let it all go to waste by just making another mess, now could I? By the way, thanks again for all the stuff you gave me. I feel that I can go through my workload twice as fast and keep my tent nice, warm and orderly!"

Miriel adjusted her glasses. "Think nothing of it. It also pleases me to know that the camp is neat and organized. I find areas of disorder and untidiness quite…disconcerting."

"So do I. It's amazing that I didn't slowly lose my mind living and working in that mess. Although, there were times that I came close…" Robin shook his head. "Anyway, you're probably wondering why you're here, right?"

"The question has crossed my mind, yes."

"Good! Because I have some very exciting news for you! Now, you're a woman of science, right? Pursuing knowledge for knowledge's sake and unlocking the secrets of the world and all that?"

"You know all of these things to be true."

"Wonderful! Because I have, for you, a mystery to solve, right here in our camp. A mystery that defies conventional explanations and demands thorough scientific research."

This visibly piqued Miriel's interest. "Please, do go on."

"You know Stahl, right?" Our resident green knight?"

"Yes, I am acquainted with him."

"Then you must also know of his reputation about being average in, well, everything."

"I have heard of something along those lines, yes. Although I dismissed such claims as simply modesty on his part."

"Yes, well that's the natural response. But, I think you'll find here," Robin handed her a few papers. "That his claims are carry some truth."

While Miriel read the papers, Robin continued. "As you can see, Stahl's averageness is prevalent all across the board. Of course, these are just my findings based on not many tests and using methods that are in no way thorough nor scientific."

"This is quite extraordinary. While these results are only preliminary and were found using very rudimentary methodology, the fact that Stahl's performance consistently remains unremarkable in every aspect is simply fascinating. How can that possibly be? This demands further research!"

"And that's where you come in! I see that this little mystery has caught your interest. So, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind carrying out some tests and getting to the bottom of it. I would do so myself but between all the fighting, planning and training, I can't find the time. Besides, you're obviously more qualified and capable to do this than I."

"Hmm. Yes. This clearly merits further investigation. Very well, I accept this task. I thank you for bringing this to my attention, Robin."

"Oh no, thank YOU for accepting this thing. I also want to be aware of any new developments in your investigation. I feel that Stahl's 'gift' could be very useful to us. I don't know how and I don't know why, but there's something there. I can feel it."

"I shall keep you informed of my progress. If any new developments arise, you shall be the first to know. Now, there is nothing else, I will now leave to start my investigation post-haste."

"Right. Happy hunting!" Robin paused. "Oh, wait, one more thing!"

Miriel turned, already halfway out of the tent. "Do you require something else?"

"Yes, actually. I already know that you know Vaike and are aware of his forgetfulness."

Miriel frowned. "Unfortunately, yes. With the way he misplaces his belongings, it is a wonder that he remembers to put on his pants every morning."

"Well, yes. While him losing things is none of my concern, it becomes my concern when that affects battlefield performance. He already forgot his axe once and would've been dead were it not for you. This time, he took a shoddy axe that shattered halfway through the battle. It's a miracle that he was able to grab a hammer off another solider and keep himself alive." Robin shook his head. "But I'll tell him off later. Right now, I need your help to ensure that this doesn't happen again."

"Certainly. How may I be of assistance?"

"Glad you're on board! Now, the last time Vaike forgot his axe, I remember you mentioning that you'd permanently stick his axe to his hands if that were to happen again. Can you really do that?"

"Hmmm. I suppose it won't be too difficult to come up with a spell that keeps his axe in his hands. You would have me invent and cast such a spell?"

"Not exactly. I would like you to come up with a spell that sticks his – or any, for that matter – axe to him. But not to his hands, just to his person. We can't have his hand be occupied while he eats or something. So, yes. I'd like you to come up with such a spell, but not cast it quite yet. Vaike is still on probation and I'm giving him a chance to improve. However, if he continues as he is now, then your spell may become necessary. Think you can do this for me?"

"Most certainly. I believe I have something of this nature in my notes. I shall have this spell ready by this time tomorrow."

"Thanks Miriel. You're a lifesaver!"

"You flatter me, Robin. But if anyone is the 'lifesaver' here, it is you. Farewell."

With that, the mage left the tent. Robin briefly wondered if she actually made a joke before dismissing the idea completely. After all, this was Miriel here. As far as Robin knew, she was incapable of humor or emotions of any kind… except for irritation (as seen by her reaction to Vaike's antics). Robin supposed she also felt something akin to happiness when she discovered something new or had something to work on. Then again, that could simply be curiosity on her part. Who knew?

"Quite a few people coming in and out of your tent, Robin. Someone's very popular around here."

Robin turned his newest guest. "What can I say? It must be my boundless and innate charisma that draws everyone to me. Of course, the fact that my tent no longer resembles a disaster area also probably helps. Although I like to think it's the charisma…and my dashing good looks."

Chrom chuckled. "As humble as ever, I see."

"That's me. Humble Robin, at your service. What do you have for me?"

"Oh, nothing special. Just some reports about events in and around camp."

"Just reports? Please, Chrom. With my new equipment – courtesy of Miriel – I now eat reports such as these for breakfast! By the way, I think she needs a raise."

"What, Miriel? What brought you to this conclusion?"

While taking the reports from Chrom, Robin pointed around his tent. "All this stuff is her doing. Did you know she single handedly cleaned and organized my entire tent? Mind you, that's impressive enough all in itself, but she also gave me a bunch of stuff to make my life easier. This 'pocket watch' and 'pen' anr just a few examples. And do you see that thing over there?"

Chrom looked to where his friend was pointing to. In the corner of the tent sat a curious contraption that looked like a small fireplace with a fire tome burning in the center.

"I assume that's also Miriel's work?"

"Yep. It's also why my tent has this nice, summery temperature instead of the biting Feroxi cold."

"Oh, wow. That's actually quite incredible! It does feel like we're back in the capital in front of the fireplace."

Robin nodded and smiled in satisfaction. "It sure does. Makes my job a lot easier, too. Drafting battle plans goes a lot faster when you can feel your fingers."

"So, Miriel just…made this?"

"Yep."

"And then she simply handed it to you? Just like that?"

"Yeah, I know. Crazy, right? I guess she was there when I was complaining about the cold and how I can't get any work done. Next thing I know, she comes into my tent and gives me this thing. Tells me I place and fire tome in it and bam! Portable room temperature regulator!"

"Impressive. Does she have more of them lying around?"

"No clue. The only reason she gave me this one was probably because I complained very loudly and frequently about how much I don't like the cold. Does your dislike for the cold match mine in intensity?"

"I don't think so. I just wear extra layers and train more."

"Well there you go. Some of us train and put on more clothes, while others sit about and complain. And it seems that the gods favor the latter by providing them with fancy temperature controlling gizmos!"

"Sure, whatever you say, Robin."

"Doubt me if you will, but the results speak for themselves. Oh, by the way, finished reading and marking the reports"

Chrom raised an eyebrow. "Finished? Already?"

Robin grinned confidently. "My dear Chrom, you underestimate me. Now that I am armed with this pen, petty documents such as these are no match for my mark hand!"

"Not even the last one?"

"Eh? The what?"

The tactician reached out and read the last report in the pile. He then looked at Chrom, then at the report, then back again at Chrom.

"Is this some sort of joke?

"Not that I'm aware of, no."

"But, ghosts? I mean, really?"

Chrom shrugged. "The others swear by it. So it has to be true. Besides, how is it that you can kill soldiers literally from beyond the grave yet draw the line at spirits?"

"Because Risen make sense!" exclaimed Robin. "They are reanimated corpses that live on some sort of dark magic. Animated corpses and nothing more. A few good stabs and they're back to being dead. Ghosts and wandering spirits? That just nonsense!"

"Well, I'm neither a mage nor a scholar, so I wouldn't know either way. But that's why I have you. I'm sure you'll have this thing figured out by the morning."

Robin merely grumbled as Chrom left his tent. Ghosts? What fresh insanity was this?! Beverages materializing out of the ether and an extra place at the table? That wasn't the work of ghosts. Ghosts wouldn't resort to something so petty. Now, Robin wouldn't say he was an expert in all things undead, but if his experience with Risen was any indication, the undead were hostile and mindless. They were determined to wipe you out, not move drinks and cups around. There had to be a logical explanation for this. Robin swore that he would have a very stern talking to with the person who came up with this ghost crap. Things were bad already, the last thing he needed was the spread of weird, superstitious nonsense!

"Um, Robin? I hope I'm not interrupting anything. Are you free?"

"Yes," replied the tactician, without looking up from his report. "Come in."

"Actually, I have been here all this time. I just didn't have a chance to speak since everyone else came in afterwards."

"Uh-huh. Sure. What do you need?"

"Well, I was wondering if you had any comments on my performance in the last battle."

Robin finally looked up. "Alright, now tell me you name and what…you…did?"

Well that was strange. Robin was sure he heard a voice. But there was no one in his tent. He looked around, checked all the corners and even under his chair. Yep, definitely alone. Yet, he was sure he heard a voice. What did that mean? Robin remembered reading that hearing voices was the first sign of insanity, but he didn't *feel* insane in the slightest. Although, would he even know that he was insane if he was insane?

"Uh, Robin? Are you alright?"

Well, there was that voice again. And he was still alone. So…what?

"I'm not entirely sure." Robin replied, uncertainly. "Who exactly are you? Wait! Are you my conscience?"

"What? No."

"Yeah, didn't think so. Oh well, it worth a shot. I always imagined that my conscience was a lot more authoritative sounding. Who am I talking to, anyway?"

"It's me, Kellam. I'm a Shepherd."

"Kellam? I don't think I've ever heard of you before. Well, there's only one way to check." Robin pulled out his roster. "Alright, yes. Kellam. Says here that you're a knight. Is this correct?"

"Yes."

Robin looked around again. He was still alone. What the hell was going on?!

"Uh, Kellam? Are you in my tent?"

"Yes."

"But I can't see you. My tent's completely empty. Yet, here I am, talking to you. Wait a minute, this can only mean one thing…" Robin said slowly before quickly stepping behind his desk.

"Uh, Robin? What's the matter? Why are you looking around like that?"

"Because YOU'RE the ghost that has been creeping around camp! Somehow, unbeknownst to us, we've lost track of you and you died somewhere. Now, your spirit has come back to haunt us by…putting up extra cups and drinks and generally freaking everybody out!"

"Robin, that's not-"

"BACK! Begone, foul spirit! I don't know where you are, but I shall send you back to the realm from whence you came!" Robin unsheathed his sword and pointed it to where he last heard the voice.

"Woah, careful with that, Robin! You can really hurt someone pointing your sword around like that!"

"Hah! You mock me! Everybody knows that the ethereal nature of ghosts renders them immune to physical objects. Well then, let's see how you handle magic!" Robin then started concentrating his power and preparing a thunder spell.

"Robin! Stop it! You're overeating. I'm not a ghost! I'm just a normal person, right in front of you!"

"That's exactly something a ghost would say to lower my guard right before he ate my soul!..Or did whatever ghosts tend to do. But you'll not have me! I'm not going down without a fight!"

"Okay, this is getting out of hand. I see that you're not going to believe what I tell you and that you're charging a spell. Please forgive me for what I'm about to do. Hopefully we can sort all this out later on."

"Oh, we'll see about that." Robin thought he heard the voice to his right. If he judged the distance right, he could blast this ghost and hopefully re-kill it. So, he swung his arm in the voice's general direction and prepared to release his spell. "Take this!"

However, as he was swinging his arm, Robin suddenly felt as though he hit a metal piece of armor. Pain (not unlike what he felt when he punched Vaike) shot through his arm. The spell died instantly as Robin gritted his teeth in pain and clutched his hand.

"Urgh, damn it! Since when do ghosts feel like they wear plate armor?!"

"Oh gosh, I'm so sorry, Robin! Are you alright?"

That was weird. The voice seemed really close. When Robin turned around, he suddenly noticed a man in full armor right next to him. This sudden appearance was so unexpected that Robin cried in surprise and jumped away. Unfortunately, this resulted in him tripping over his chair and falling flat on the floor.

Well, it could've been worse. At least I didn't fall on my face.

The knight materialized next to him once again. "Oops, sorry, sorry! Are you okay?"

"I've been better." Robin grumbled before looking over at his guest. "Who the hell are you and what are you doing in my tent?"

"Oh, I'm Kellamt…the person you've been talking with?"

"The ghost?"

"I've been trying to tell you all this time, I'm not a ghost. Just a regular person like everyone else."

"So…you're not dead?"

"Nope. As alive as can be."

Robin looked at him dubiously. "Are you sure? You seem to appear out of nowhere like some sort spirit. It's very unsettling."

Kellam sighed sadly. "Yeah, I guess that's just the way I am."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, people tend not to notice me, is all. I guess that I've always lacked a presence. I just…fade into the background and people don't pay any attention to me."

"That's ridiculous. A guy like you in your bulky suit of armor, walking around unnoticed by anyone?"

"I was in your tent before Sumia entered and long after that, yet you weren't aware of me until I spoke up."

"Huh, I guess that's true. How…? Whatever. Something to think about at a later time. Help me up?"

Once he drank another disgusting concoction and sat down in his chair, Robin stared in front of him, where he could see Kellam…sort of.

"Right. Okay, so you somehow mastered the art of invisibility then?"

"Uh, I wouldn't really say 'mastered' and wouldn't call it 'invisibility' per se, but…"

"Uh-huh. Were in our last battle?"

"Yes I was, actually. I don't suppose you saw me?"

Robin looked at his after action report. "Nope, can't say I have. Although it does say here that there were some enemy casualties that are unaccounted for. I also recall Chrom talking with what I assumed was a tree. I assume that was you?"

"Yep. Just trying to help out. I was actually with you ever since you left the capital."

"What? You were? Huh. If you were helping us out on the quiet, you'd think that I'd notice something like that. Why didn't I?" Robin wondered before remembering who he was talking to. "Oh right, ha ha. Well, no harm done. You're here with us and that's all that matters."

"Err, right. I guess so. Do you have any comments on my performance by any chance?"

"Afraid not. I need to be aware of people under my command and know what they're doing in order to provide commentary."

Kellam looked disappointed. "Oh, I see…"

"But hey! Don't look so glum! As they say, no news is good news. And you're all alive and well now, so clearly you're doing something right, right?"

"Well, I guess if I look at it that way, you're right. Thanks Robin."

"No problem. Now then, you say you had this 'presence' problem for as long as you can remember?"

Kellam nodded. "Yes, that's right. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Just some clarification for my notes. Given the right circumstances, I'm thinking you would make an

exceptional spy. You're pretty much invisible to everyone, so walking into the enemy's camp and stealing their battle plans or mapping their troops would probably be no problem for you. Of course, we'd probably have to give you lighter clothes, can't have your armor giving you away, now can we? Hmmm, yes. This would be excellent if our enemies weren't disorganized brigands and mindless Risen. You'd make the best infiltrator ever, he he he…"

"Robin? Are you alright? You're…cackling."

"What? Oh, I'm fine. Just thinking about things. Well, thanks for coming today, Kellam. I'm sorry I couldn't help you more, but you did inform me of your existence and gave me a few ideas for the future. So, just keep doing what you did all this time and we'll be in touch. Oh, and sorry for that whole 'ghost' thing."

"Oh, it's quite alright. I'm used that sort of thing. Thanks Robin, glad I could help."

With that, Kellam got up and disappeared in a blink of an eye. That was actually quite amazing. One second he's there and then gone the next. Truly, this had limitless tactical possibilities! Possibilities that Robin would explore…later on. His head still hurt a bit from before and thinking would not make it better. However, before lying down, Robin made sure to jot down a few notes on the roster.

Note to self: get Miriel to investigate how Kellam can possibly disappear into thin air and walk around in his armor unnoticed by anyone (after she finishes investigating the mystery behind Stahl's averageness).

Also: Kellam as a spy/infiltrator (something to think about).

Related to the above: see if he can get us some gold. Brigands probably have secret stashes, right?

Either that, or have him steal the equipment we need. What? Those unscrupulous merchants are deliberately inflating the prices for quality weapons and we're broke! If this situation doesn't change soon, we're not only going to be broke, but also dead. Dead and broke. Dead broke!

Heh, that one's definitely going into the joke book.

Chapter 10: Lon'qu

Another week, another update. Thanks to all those who followed and favorited.

Robin was many things: tactician, adequate sword user, competent spellcaster, avid reader, just to name a few. What Robin wasn't (as far as he could remember) was a diplomat. Now, he couldn't speak for himself back when he had his memories, but current, memoryless Robin could very safely say that one of the things that he definitely wasn't was a diplomat. Robin always thought that diplomacy was boring and tedious. It involved a lot of talking, not messing with other people's egos, keeping your emotions under control, backroom deals, reading between the lines and insulting others in a way that was subtle, respectful yet effectively offensive. Even thinking about it, Robin could feel himself dying inside a little. He had the utmost respect for the people who represented their countries at official functions along with pity for those who were appointed and didn't volunteer. Robin vastly preferred staying in his tent and planning strategies. It was more straightforward and a lot less stressful. Plan your troop movements, eliminate the enemy and keep your own casualties to a minimum. Simple and straightforward.

So, when he set off to Regna Ferox, Robin planned to let Chrom do the talking and just stay in the shadows, saying nothing lest he disrespect whoever was in charge. Of course, Regna Ferox was not Ylisse. Regna Ferox had a whole different culture, climate and people. Feroxi diplomacy also differed vastly from Ylissean diplomacy. Instead of long, complicated and drawn-out negotiations, the Feroxi prefered to settle things the old fashioned way. The Shepherds discovered this when they were thrust into the arena to represent Flavia against Basilio's forces to determine who gets to rule over the vast country.

Although the impromptu fight was unexpected (as was running into "Marth"), Robin had to say that he vastly preferred Feroxi diplomacy to Ylissean diplomacy. It was quick, effective and got things done in half the time it would take at the negotiating table. Heck, Robin wished that all diplomacy was done this way. No more negotiations, no backroom deals or two-faced lies. If two countries disagreed on something, all they needed to do was get their strongest warriors to duel and whoever won got whatever they wanted out of the argument. Heck, if that were the case, Robin would've been first in line to sign up as a foreign diplomat. He would've made a damn fine diplomat too, judging by how the Feroxi mission went. If the whole world adopted the Feroxi system of diplomacy, Robin would've been the most persuasive diplomat alive! And just to make things interesting, maybe states could even expand on the Feroxi system. Instead of just the champions, they could have entire armies fight for their nation. They could even move around the world, not confined to a simple arena. It would be glorious. It would be amazing! It would be…

It would be kinda like war. Now that Robin thought about it, it wouldn't be kinda like actual war, it *would* be war. That was actually the very definition of war! How disappointing. Although also expected. Robin was a man of war. He excelled on the field and made winning wars his profession (or had that profession thrust upon him. Whatever). So he obviously would've preferred Feroxi diplomacy. Unfortunately, this type of diplomacy was uniquely Feroxi. Any other way to implement it would've resulted in plain old war. Too bad. So the boring type of diplomacy was the best kind by default. Oh well, a tactician could always dream.

And dream he did. After their successful "negotiations", Flavia became Khan they quickly got to discussing what soldiers Regna Ferox would provide, how many and what roles they would fulfil. It was surprisingly quick and productive. The Feroxi seemed eager for combat in any form and were more than willing to help Ylisse (or course, the Plegian incursions helped too). After all that was said and done, everyone was shown to their rooms so they could get ready for the march back to Ylisse the next morning. This gave Robin the chance to see how the Feroxi decorate their offices. And so far, he vastly preferred the one he had back in Ylisse.

To be fair, the office that he was given wasn't bad, per se. It had all the standard things one would expect to find in an office: bookshelves, books, weapon racks (more so here in Ferox, but whatever), pictures, chairs, a desk (nothing special. His was better…when it was still in one piece…it still hurt thinking about it) etc. The office was spacious enough and had room for Robin to pace and plan and think. All in all, it was alright. The one thing that brought it down was all the dead animals and their skins here.

Now, Robin wasn't an interior decorator or some sort of critiquer of…art(?) He also didn't understand the cultural differences between Ylisse and Regna Ferox, so he really couldn't judge from that front. For all he knew, all these animal skins and decorations could be signs of respect and status. However, on a *personal* level, this style scared the crap out of him! Too many dead things in his workspace. The only time he was surrounded by so many corpses was when he was fighting Risen (and he preferred Risen because they disappeared when he rekilled them). As it was, Robin had a bearskin rug on his floor, some sort of wolfskin cover on his chair, some unidentifiable animal skins on the walls as well as a bunch of animal heads. He probably hated those the worst. The rug was bad enough because he already almost tripped (keyword being "almost". Not "tripped" but almost tripped. Ha!) on it maybe three times, but he felt that the animal

heads were watching him. Watching and judging with their cold, dead eyes, somehow blaming him for the fact that they were now mounted in his office. Of course, that was just crazy talk. Robin knew that. He also knew that the animals *didn't* follow his every movements with their eyes and that they would definitely *not* start talking to him. Robin knew that. But it didn't make them any less creepy, especially that deer above his chair. The way it was positioned made Robin feel very uncomfortable. Now that he was looking at it, he almost expected it to blink, turn its head, smile and start saying things like-

"Robin."

"AGH!"

The tactician jumped back ten feet, almost tripped on the carpet (again), regained his balance and stared at the deer unbelievingly. It took him a full ten seconds to realize that the voice actually came from behind, and *not* from the deer's head. When Robin turned around, he noticed a dour looking man standing in the doorway.

"Dear Naga, man!" he exclaimed while putting his hand on his chest and waiting for his heartbeat to normalize. "Don't just sneak up on someone like that! At least knock or something!"

The man frowned. "Aren't you supposed to be the tactician? Ready for anything? If I were an enemy assassin, you would be dead by now."

"Wha-?" Robin blinked at the unexpected hostile front. However, he quickly recovered and went on a counteroffensive. "First of all, I'm part of a foreign delegation that includes royalty to parlay with your leader. I'd think that our security detail would be thorough enough to not allow any assassins in. Thus, I think that it's within my rights to let my mind wander in friendly territory. Secondly, you could've been an assassin, but you're not. If you were, you'd probably be dead because I *always* have plans. And finally, who the hell are you?"

The dour looking man looked even dourer. "Hmph. Do you not remember me from earlier during the day? I am Lon'qu, Basilio's contribution to your cause."

"Woah, calm down there, Lon-judges-you. If we met you after the battle, then I was busy thinking about something important. Probably Marth and just who the hell he is. Besides, names aren't my strong suit. I've met like, a dozen people in the past week alone, so excuse me if I can't remember all of them!" Robin huffed. "Now, you said you're a Shepherd?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing here?"

"You are our tactician. Chrom may lead on the battlefield but you decide where we go and what we do. I was told to go see you so that you can make the most of my skills."

"Oh. Yeah, that makes sense. Come in, sit down and let me consult my notes."

"…I thought you said you didn't remember me."

"Well, yes and no. I don't remember your name and you, to a lesser extent. But I trust myself enough to make notes on new members despite my inability to remember them. It's like second nature to me. I may not pay all that much attention, but my mind starts working when the right words are said. It's like 'blah blah blah join the Shepherds, blah blah blah' and bam! Attention shifted! Afterward, I go back, get out my trusty roster and make some general notes about our newest recruit."

"…"

"I can see from your expression that you don't believe me. So let me prove you wrong!" Robin then proceeded to reach into his sleeves and pull out the all-important roster. "Let's see here…ah ha! Here you are. See? 'Grumpy McDourson with sword(s): looks fast, agile, skilled with…swords? (note: needs confirmation), lightly armored – implies fast and precise fighting style, also not as muscular as Vaike so probably doesn't do good when hit, but specializes in avoiding hits (also needs confirmation), looks like he has a constant raincloud over his head – could probably make lesser men flinch just by looking at them. PS: has something against women – investigate.' That's what I've written down based on my first impressions of you. Now, am I right or am I right?"

Robin sat down behind his desk and looked at Lon'qu expectantly.

The swordsman stared back with a raised eyebrow before sighing. "I don't know whether to be impressed with you assessment or worried that you're the one who drafts our overall strategies."

"Yeah, I know!" laughed Robin. "I sometimes can't believe it either. But hey, you make do with what you're dealt, so here we are. Now come on in, take a seat and tell me all about yourself so you don't die when next we fight."

Lon'qu sighed again before relenting.

"Tell me what you need to know."

"Right. First of all, how do you spell your name?"

"…You're kidding."

"Am not," said Robin seriously. "Names of the people who are under your command are the first and most important things to remember. It just so happens that yours is foreign and not very obvious to me. What? Don't give me that look! Come on, even you gotta admit that your name is the most foreign sounding one out here. It's not 'Frederick' or 'Stahl' or 'Lissa'. I even think it's like, two words or something. Now tell me how to spell your name…unless you want me to make high quality puns based on what I think your name sounds like. I could call you 'Long queue' or 'Looks-disapprovingly-at-you' or, heh, this'll be a good one, 'Lon-"

"Enough! I see your point. My name is Lon'qu, spelled L-O-N apostrophe Q-U."

"Great!" Robin said cheerily while updating the roster. He then looked at it for a few seconds before asking, "So…how do you pronounce that?"

Lon'qu glared.

"…Alright, why don't I just called you LQ? It'll probably make both our lives easier."

Lon'qu grumbled.

"I'm gonna take that as a 'yes'. Now, moving on. Tell me about yourself. My initial impressions were accurate, right?"

"Yes, surprisingly so. I am a myrmidon and thus specialize in quickly dealing with my enemies. I get in, strike hard, strike fast, and get out."

"I feel like there is a dirty joke in there somewhere…" muttered Robin. "Er, anyway, what about your armor, or lack thereof? I notice that you're only wearing some very light, robe-likes clothes. I can't imagine that they protect you much when you get hit."

"If I get injured, it is because I have made a mistake. I *rarely* make mistakes."

"Bold words. We'll have to see if you can back them up during training. But you were Basilio's champion, so that probably means something. That dude looks like he won't let just anybody be his champion."

Lon'qu remained silent as Robin wrote a few things on his roster.

"Okay, next topic: spare time. What do you do when you have some spare time?"

"I train."

"Aaaannnd…"

"I improve my swordsmanship."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Come on, there *has* to be something else."

"…My potato peeling skills are second to none."

Robin sighed. "Well, aside from that very poor attempt at humor, I can see that this isn't going anywhere. You're not very social, are you?"

"I talk with others as much as is required of me. Otherwise, I train. Is that so wrong?"

"I guess not. If it makes you happy, who am I to tell people how to live their lives? And I guess all that training makes you

a better soldier. That's always a plus."

"It does."

"Alright. That's fine. Now that we've got that out of the way, let's address a very important issue here. Of course, I'm talking about your issue with women. What's going on there?"

Lon'qu winced. "It's…complicated."

"Oh, personal issues. I get it and I'm not going to pry. However, your issue becomes my issue when it interferes with your abilities on the battlefield."

"You needn't worry."

"Oh? Do explain."

"Although I do have a crippling aversion to women, I can suppress it in instinctual, life-and-death situations. So you needn't worry. I shall be fine in the heat of battle."

Robin didn't look convinced. "Really? So I don't have to worry about you on when we go off to face the enemy? You won't suddenly freeze up when facing an enemy War Cleric or something?"

"No."

"And what of your comrades? We do have a fair number of women amongst us. Of course, I'll try to pair you off with a male battle partner, but we can't all have what we want all the time. There will be instances when you'll be assigned a female partner. Can I trust you not to turn into a quivering wreck and get either yourself, your partner or both of you killed?"

"Robin, I can assure you that my…condition shall not affect my performance in battle."

"Hm, we'll have to see. I'll see how you perform during training and battle and decide what to do with you from there."

"You don't sound convinced."

"Nothing personal. It's not that I don't trust you, but I like to account for all the variables. Besides, your battle with Marth does cast doubt on your claim."

"What about it?" asked Lon'qu, surprised.

Robin shrugged. "Well, I think you'll agree with me that Marth isn't the most masculine of men out there. Given a few minor changes, he could very realistically pass off as a girl. Now, you claim to have your little phobia under control in the heat of battle. However, from what I hear, Marth beat you with barely any effort."

"Er…"

"So you'll have to forgive me a bit for wanting to be careful. I mean, if a girly looking man beat you, how will you react when fighting against – or alongside – a full grown woman?"

"Those two situations are completely different!"

"Are they? But that brings up another point. How're you going to get on with our female members? If you're fighting with them, you're going to have to train with them. And since that isn't a life-and-death situation, are you just going to be all twitchy again? That doesn't bode well for either of you. You'll need to train against all our members to improve your skills. You're also going to have to talk to them, LQ. These are all very important issues that we have to deal with. How do you plan on dealing with them?"

Luckily for Lon'qu, someone entered Robin's office before he could offer a reply.

"Heeeeey Robin!"

"Hello Lissa. What brings you here?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just in the area and wanted to drop by and say hello."

Robin looked at the princess suspiciously. "Lissa, I know you better than that. What do you really want?"

"What? Nothing, I swear! I just wanted to say hello." She then turned to Lon'qu. "Oh hey, our newest Shepherd. I feel like we didn't get a proper introduction last time."

"Our previous introduction was sufficient. Now don't get any closer!" exclaimed the swordsman while shuffling his chair away from the approaching princess.

"Aww, don't be like that!"

"Sorry Lissa," Robin shook his head. "The aversion to women is real with this one. We were just trying to figure out what to do about it."

"Hey, maybe I can help!"

Before Robin could reply, a second person barged into his office.

"There you are, Robin! I got a few things I want to say to you!"

"Sully. Someone's looking very excited today. What's up?"

"Oh nothing, I just want to thank you."

"Aw, thanks! I'm just doing what I can to help….what did I do?"

Sully laughed. "Classic Robin! Pretending not to know what he did to make it seem like nothing." She then punched him in the arm good-naturedly.

"Yeah, ha ha, pretending. Ha ha, ouch…" the tactician winced and rubbed his arm. "Seriously, what'd I do?"

"Oh, you know. For giving me that challenge back before we left Ylisstol."

"Yes. Of course. The challenge. That was given to you. By me. Before we left the capital. I did do that. Yes."

"You bet your ass you did!" Sully said enthusiastically. "And you know what? It paid off big. Back then, I thought you simply gave me a challenge to improve my physical abilities. 'Beat all the male Shepherds'. Sounds straightforward enough, right? Clear goal and objective? But there was more to that, and you knew it."

"Uh, yeah! There sure was. I'm glad you figured…it out."

"You're a damned clever man, Robin. You knew that I wouldn't be able to win with brute force alone. Sure, some of our newer recruits, and Virion and Stahl were easy enough, though I don't think Stahl was giving it his all. I need to convince that sissy to man up and train for real… Anyway, I couldn't beat Vaike not matter how hard I tried. Say what you will about him, but he's definitely one of the strongest Shepherds."

"Yep. Takes hits like a champ, too."

"He does. For the longest damned time, I couldn't beat him not matter how hard I tried. That got me thinking that I needed a different approach. So that's what I did until I found something that worked. Used his strength and momentum against him, found the right place to hit and then boom! Vaike fell like a log." Sully laughed. "Damned clever of you, Robin. With this challenge you set me, I feel like I'm becoming twice the warrior I would be otherwise!"

The tactician just smiled and nodded. Truth be told, he had absolutely no idea what Sully was talking about. But he trusted her judgement. After all, she said that whatever Robin told her was a good idea. That made sense. Since it came from him, it was guaranteed to be a good idea. Probably. It's just that Robin had lots of ideas and really couldn't keep track of them all. So, once he put his ideas into motion, he kinda let them do their own thing and moved on. Clearly, that turned out to be the right move, given Sully's enthusiasm.

"Right. Well, I'm glad you're taking this thing so seriously, Sully."

"Har! You bet your ass I am! Beating Vaike is just another step on the path to Frederick and Chrom. That'll the ultimate test of my abilities."

"Wow. I didn't know you rated my brother so highly."

"Oh, hey Lissa. Sorry, didn't see you there. I was too excited after beating Vaike. But yeah. Your brother is the strongest one here. A damn fine warrior, too. He's the one we should all aspire to be." Sully then looked at the other occupant in the room. "Hey, don't think we've met. You our newest member?"

Robin intervened as Lon'qu paled.

"Yes he is. Sully, LQ. LQ, Sully. By the way, that's not his real name, you'll probably hear how to pronounce it better than me. LQ here is going to be sticking with us for a while. A word of caution: don't get too close to him."

"Huh? Why not?"

Before Robin could answer, a third voice could be heard just outside his office.

"Come…on! Ugh…just…a little…further…AH!" A thud, followed by groans. "Ouch. That one actually hurt…"

Robin chuckled and shook his head. He didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing if he could immediately identify who that was based on what he just heard.

"Sumia? Are you alright?"

A startled yelp.

"Robin?"

"Yes. In here."

Sure enough, Sumia appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, hi Robin. Lissa and Sully, too. Wow, quite a few people here. Are you having a meeting or something?"

"Not really, we were just…" Robin paused. "What were we doing?"

"Well, I was in the area and decided to drop by and get acquainted with our newest Shepherd," replied Lissa. "And then Sully came in to talk about her training regimen and how well that was going."

"Oh yeah, that. Thanks, Lissa. I suppose since you're here, we might as well get the introductions out of the way. Sully, Lissa, Sumia, this is L…" Robin pointed to the where Lon'qu was sitting, only to find the chair empty. He then looked over to find its occupant pressing himself against a bookshelf. "…Q?"

"Nice to meet you!" Sumia smiled and approached the swordsman. "I'm Sumia. I hope you'll-"

"Get back!"

Sumia flinched and withdrew her hand immediately. "I'm sorry! Did I offend you in some way?"

Meanwhile, Sully took in the scene before looking back at Robin.

"What's with him?"

Robin sighed. "Well, it turns out that our friend here has some sort of condition that makes him…uncomfortable around women. When around them, he…well, you all saw his reaction just now."

Sully frowned. "I don't mean any disrespect or anything, but can we use such a warrior given how many women there are among the Shepherds?"

"Of course we can!" Lissa interjected. "Before Marth, Lon'qu here was Basilio's champion, chosen to represent him in future tournaments. That alone proves how talented Lon'qu is, doesn't it?"

"That so?"

"Yep! Now, I haven't seen him fight, but I'll bet that he cuts bad guys like butter and doesn't even break a sweat! Fighting as Basilio's champion also probably put him up against some pretty tough opponents, too."

"Really?" Sully looked thoughtful before turning to Robin. "What's your assessment?"

"What? Oh, right. Well, aside from his issue with women, LQ seems to be quite the warrior. Lissa was right in that he got a bunch of experience as Basilio's champion. Beat down many people in the area, if this record is to be believed. All we have to do now is see how he trains and fights with the women in our group."

"I see…"

Robin shivered as Sully looked at Lon'qu. She had a glimmer in her eye. It was a glimmer that said 'I'm going to put you through hell whether you like it or not' or 'I'm gonna kill you twice'. Maybe both those things at once. Robin was sure he saw that same glimmer when Sully was skewering Risen (and technically, killing them for a second time). Whatever she was thinking, it did not bode well for Lon'qu.

Robin's suspicions proved correct when the knight suddenly grabbed the swordsman by the arm and dragged him out of the office.

"W-what are you doing, woman?! Unhand me at once!"

"Come on, man up! I'm going to help solve your woman issue. And I'll do so by sparring with you, right now."

"What?! No! I refuse! Let go of me I say!"

"Refuse all you want, this is happening."

And everyone left in the room waited in silence until Lon'qu's protests could be heard no longer. Lissa was the first one to speak.

"You're not going to let her just drag him away, are you?"

It took Robin a few seconds to realize that she was addressing him. "What? Oh no, I'm not getting in the middle of that. If I tried, Sully then might want to fight me! And as the tactician of this army, I need to be in full physical condition to draft plans. Why do you care, anyway?"

"Well, I'm the healer! It's my job to care. Besides, Lon'qu has got some sort of problem with women and Sully beating him silly won't solve anything. She also shouldn't just drag him off like that! I mean, what if some of us wanted to know our newest recruit better? This would've been our chance to talk to him and now…" Lissa paused as she noticed Robin smiling at her. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. I just think it's really cute how hard you're crushing on LQ."

Lissa's face immediately went red. "I-I'm not crushing on him! I just have an interest in him because he's new!"

Robin's smile widened. "I'm sure it's a bit more than that. After the battle, you were the first one to try and talk to him. I might not have been paying attention to what was going on, but I did tune in for a bit. And I'm pretty sure you were all over mister 'tall, dark and handsome swordsman' over there."

"Stop making things up!" Lissa pouted. "I don't have a crush on him. I mean, sure he may be totally handsome and act all aloof and brooding and gruff. And he may have that cool, uncaring demeanor to go along with his 'hardened warrior' image that makes him really dreamy. And I *may* want to talk to him and get to know everything about him and stuff, but that doesn't mean anything!"

Robin said nothing and continued to smile.

"…Okay, fine. Maybe I do have a teensy, little crush on him. Just a small one. But don't go around telling anyone! Especially Chrom. I don't want him going all 'overprotective brother mode' and doing something crazy."

"My lips are sealed."

"You too, Sumia."

"Of course."

"Good. Now that that's settled, I'm going to go off and see how Lon'qu fights. If I'm lucky maybe I'll get to see something good. Bye!"

With that, Lissa waved goodbye and left.

"Ah, young love. How sweet and innocent it is. I wonder if anything will come out of it..." Robin wondered aloud before changing topics. "Sumia, hey. Sorry about all that. Things got a bit out of control there. What brings you here?"

"Huh? Oh, right. Nothing, really. I was actually just passing by when I…fell."

"Yes, I seem to remember now. Sounded like you were carrying something heavy."

"Nothing too heavy. Just a bag of books."

"Books, you say? Mind if I have a look?"

"Not at all. In fact, I left the bag just outside your office."

"Great. I can't wait to see what kind of books you got. Are you an avid reader."

"Oh yes! I love reading, especially novels. Nothing is better than a good novel. I sometimes get so caught up that I forget my own sad little life."

"Oh, don't say that! I think your life is neither sad nor little. I mean, you are part of a-WOW that's a lot of books!" Robin gasped as he looked at the bag that Sumia referred to. He imagined something smallish and light. What he got was a sack that was half his height and positively filled with books. So many, that there were books falling out of it.

"S-Sumia, where'd you find so many books?"

"Well, someone threw them out of a wagon, so I figured I'd give them a good home."

"I can't believe someone threw all of these away! Look at all the books! I'm glad you came along when you did, otherwise, who knows what would've happened to all this precious knowledge? Can I see what you got?"

"By all means."

As Robin started sifting thought the various books in the bag, Sumia looked over his shoulder and asked "Based on your enthusiasm, I take it you also enjoy a good book?"

"You bet!" replied Robin. "You'd think I read only tactical manuals, but I also enjoy a bit of everything else. You never know what you'll find in the next book you read. It's really an adventure every time I pick up a new book. Sometimes, I'll even-WOW! *History's Mysteries: Shadow Dragons, Second Edition*. And look! *Shanty Pete and the Haunted Pirates* and wow! You even have the entire *Might or Magic* series! I can't believe anybody would throw these out. You really hit the jackpot with all of these!"

Sumia giggled at Robin's obvious excitement. "I'm glad you share my enthusiasm for books, Robin. Would you like to borrow some?"

The tactician looked up at her with wide eyes. Not since she first offered him a taste of her pie has she seen that look.

"Do you really mean that, Sumia?"

"Of course," she replied. "After seeing how fond of are of reading, how can I say no? Besides, I certainly can't read them all at once."

"You're the best, Sumia!" Robin exclaimed before setting some books aside. "Wait, these are your books, so you should get to pick the ones you want first."

"That's alright. I already have some that I'm reading right now. Take all the ones you want. This way, we can recommend to each other what to read afterwards!"

"Sounds like a plan!"

By the time Robin stood up, he had emptied half of Sumia's bag and had two large stacks of books in his hands.

"Alrighty then. Now to just…make my way…to the desk and put…these down there…"

"Robin? Are you sure you don't need any help?"

"Oh no. I'm…fine. Besides…this is good upper body training."

And so it was. Robin could feel his muscles working as he slowly made his way to his desk. The burning in his arms proved that he was getting stronger. Of course, it was a slow and painstaking process and the distance from the door the desk seemed to have gotten ten times longer. But he triumphed in the end. By treading softly (and avoiding that damned bearskin carpet) Robin eventually got all the books onto his desk. The sense of accomplishment was unparalleled.

"Phew! Thanks for waiting, Sumia."

"No problem. I have to say, I admire your determination. When you put your mind to something, you get it done."

"Th-thanks!" Robin panted. "I-it's a gift and a curse. N-now then, let me help carry the bag to your room."

"Robin, you don't have to do that. Now that you took out half the books, the bag is light enough for me to carry. Besides, you look pretty tired after carrying two full stacks of books."

"T-that's nothing! I am still ready for m-more. It's all part of my endurance training."

"Robin-"

"Sumia, I insist."

The pegasus knight looked at him before sighing. "You're not going to take no for an answer, are you?"

Robin smiled. "You said so yourself, when I put my mind to something, I get it done. Now," he walked up and hoisted the bag onto his back. "Shall we?"

It was partly true. Robin did look at this exercise as some kind of endurance training. But that wasn't the main reason he was doing this. He cared for Sumia, he really did. But because he cared, he also worried. He worried because, despite her performance on the battlefield, Sumia still tripped and fell off of it. While she didn't hurt herself too badly, Robin still worried what would happen if she fell while doing some heavy lifting or something. Like now. The book bag that he was carrying was still pretty damn heavy! However, Robin knew himself well enough to not trip on the smallest wrinkle in the carpet while carrying heavy loads. His worries were vindicated when Sumia tripped and fell beside him as they were walking toward her room. Fortunately, she didn't hurt herself. Unfortunately, her falling caused Robin to lose his balance and fall as well. With the full weight of the books at his back and the hardness of the floor at the front, the impact was… painful, to say the least. Oh well, at least they were close to her room. Robin didn't think he could get up otherwise.

Chapter 11: Maribelle

Update ahoy!

Good things come to those who wait.

That was a saying. That was a saying that people said. That was a saying that people said that was true, otherwise people wouldn't be saying it, right? Right. It was a saying that was around for…a great many number of years. That's how it became a saying. And since it became a saying, it was bound to have some truth in it. The truth, of course, being that the longer someone waited for something good, the better it would feel when he received it. That was what it meant, right? Well, regardless of what the saying actually meant, Robin chose to believe in his interpretation. He did so mostly because he would've been infinitely more upset if he didn't.

And Robin was pretty damn upset already! No sooner had the Shepherds arrived from their successful negotiations in Regna Ferox when suddenly there was news about something on the border with Plegia. Something about hostages and the Plegian king being a dick, as usual. Robin really wasn't paying attention. He was just counting the seconds until whatever the news was got delivered so he could rush off into his office and admire his new desk. Alas, it was not to be, because fate was cruel. Immediately after Phila delivered the news, Chrom announced that they would be heading out to "parlay" with the Plegian king. Of course, Robin chose this precise moment to tune in and was greatly disappointed. They'd just got back from Regna Ferox and now they were heading south. They didn't even get a chance to get to their rooms! It was all 'hey, good job with the Feroxi. I bet you're tired and would like to see your new desk and sleep in your bed right about now, right? Well, too bad! Now get your crap (that you didn't even have time to unpack) and go do this thing that suddenly popped up. Good luck!'

So, that severely put a damper on Robin's mood. He also didn't like the scenario they were in the longer he thought about it (after he was mostly done with complaining and grumbling. Mostly). Exalt Emmeryn was going to the southern border to parlay with the Plegian king. To parlay with someone they called "The Mad King". Robin supposed that he should really admire Emmeryn's determination to seek a peaceful solution to this situation, no matter how hopeless it seemed. The Plegian king was obviously looking to start a war and he already did a bunch of crap that wouldn't be tolerated by any other leader. It was a wonder that things didn't kick off sooner. Hell, if Robin was in charge, he wouldn've mobilized his army as soon as the first bandit raids began. He then would've stationed all of his available soldiers on the borders, armed them with the best weaponry available and gave them orders to eliminate any bandits on sight. Then, when the Plegians amassed their army proper (which they would inevitably to), he would order all his battalions to march into Plegia all at once and…and…wait a minute. In order to carry out this hypothetical scenario, he would need an army. A pretty big army, too. But Emmeryn demobilized her army and left a handful of people to guard the entire country. Well, her determination to negotiate suddenly seemed totally justified. After all, one can't do much from a position of relative (or, in this case, total) weakness. Ylisse was at all being peaceful while Plegia militarized for gods know now long. Huh.

Robin couldn't really judge Emmeryn's decisions, given his lack of knowledge of anything before Chrom found him in a field. But, as their current tactician, he was free to assess the situation from that angle as he saw fit. And what he saw was a disaster waiting to happen. How could you just demilitarize your country? You just leave yourself extremely vulnerable to other, more militant nations. Doubly so if those nations were clearly building up their military, were ruled by someone named "The Mad King" and, worst of all, were your neighbors. Frankly, Robin was surprised that Plegia didn't invade Ylisse sooner. At least Regna Ferox was friendly and not as aggressive as Plegia.

So, with these thoughts in mind and the Shepherds at his back, Robin followed Emmeryn to try and negotiate with this "Mad King". It went about as well as expected. Emmeryn tried to reason. Gangrel continued to be crazy (and kind of a dick) and effectively declared war. It was a good thing that Robin liked to plan ahead, otherwise things could've gone real bad. Of course, all the planning in the world cannot account for everything during battle. And today, Robin met what was perhaps the most terrifying thing he'd seen up to date. It was just a good thing that he brought Virion along.

And now Robin was sitting in his tent, looking the archer in the eye.

"Why Robin, you have a most intense look in your eyes. Whatever is the matter?"

"Virion, I have a few things I want to say to you."

"My, my. Such gravity. Should I be worried?"

"No, not at all. I actually called you here to apologize."

"Oh? Whatever for?"

"Remember when I first interviewed you? I was suspicious of your motives for joining us and mocked your claims of wyvern riders and the fact that you claimed you would be able to shoot a bunch of them down."

"Ah, that's right. You mocked my very noble claim that I would shoot down twenty wyvern riders to prove my loyalty. But, after my magnificent performance today, I suppose you are ready to eat your words?"

"Yes, I am."

"You…are?" Virion asked, incredulously.

"Yes," replied Robin. "Why? You sound surprised."

"Well, people generally don't like to admit when they're wrong. That goes double if the person they are admitting their wrongness to is me."

"Well Virion, I may be the in charge of our army tactics, but I am a man of my word. I am also not above recognizing when I was wrong and apologizing to those I have wronged. So, I'm sorry. You are truly as talented as you constantly boast to us and we are lucky to have you."

"High praise from the tactician himself! But it was no matter, I am happy to assist all my comrades-in-arms. I suppose this proves that I am an honest soldier and have no ulterior motives?"

"What? Oh, yeah. Sure. Beyond a doubt. By the way, this brings me to my second point."

"Yes?"

"I wanted to congratulate you on your outstanding performance on the battlefield today."

"Why of course, my battle skills are always-"

"I mean, on a regular day, you're like the average soldier. But today, you were probably the one who did the most out of all of us."

"Well, yes, I always say that-"

"But most importantly," continued Robin, completely oblivious to Virion's attempts to speak, "You totally saved my ass on multiple occasions today. I am truly thankful for that. You know why? Because today, I learned that wyvern riders were a thing. And they are godsdamned terrifying! I mean, normally they would be scary, but at least I would be able fall behind Frederick or something. Get backup, you know? But NOPE! I decided that I would ride in the air with Sumia again. 'It'll give me a great vantage point' I thought. 'I'll be able to pick off more enemies from there' I thought. What I didn't think was how terrifying it would be fighting wyverns who are trying to bite my face off gods know how high up in the sky! And if it wasn't the wyverns, then it was their riders swinging their axes trying to cut me into little, bite sized pieces! Gods, you know what else?"

Sensing that talking would get him nowhere, Virion remained silent.

"Those blasted wyverns are really, really hard to kill! More so when I have little room to maneuver and have to hold on to Sumia to prevent myself from falling to my untimely demise. The most I could do was swing my sword wildly to try to block their axes and teeth. That clearly didn't do much thanks to those blasted wyvern scales. The next logical thing to try was magic, right? Wrong! Turns out, wyvern riders shrug off thunder spells like they're nothing and fire spells just tickle them! The only thing that worked remotely well was wind spells. Yet even then, they just flinched a bit before continuing to try and dismember me. I guess I can see why. Did you know we still use the basic, first level spells on our enemies? Can't take out an entire wyvern with these blasted peashooter wind tomes, that's for sure! Damn merchants and their price inflation. You know what? I think today has put me off flying forever. Now I'll always be worried and freaking out whether the enemy had more wyvern riders just waiting behind the hill just waiting to turn me into a midair snack."

Robin leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I guess the only bright side of this whole adventure was that I was able to keep the wyverns off Sumia. I'm actually positive that they would've made short work of her if I hadn't been up there with her. They almost made short work out of me! So…yeah. Thanks for shooting down those oversized lizards and getting us out alive, Virion."

"…I didn't know you were so frustrated, Robin." The archer said, after waiting a few seconds to see if Robin would continue on with his rant. "Is this frustration because of today's battle or a culmination of the past few weeks?"

"It's more 'minor irritation' rather than 'frustration', really. And mostly due to a lack of funds which prevents us from buying

proper weapons that then prevent us from doing any significant damage against enemies such as wyvern riders. Heh, I guess that's why I kept you around, huh?"

"Robin, you wound me!" exclaimed Virion dramatically. "Here I thought you kept me around because of my devilishly good looks, my noble mannerisms and my quick wit. To hear that you need me purely for my – admittedly impressive – archery skills! I feel so hurt and betrayed!"

The tactician stared at Virion quizzically before bursting into laughter. He continued laughing for a few minutes before finally calming down.

"Well, I guess one of those things was true. Thanks, Virion. I needed that."

"It is no problem, for I, Virion, am a master in all things up to and including being the sympathetic ear that listens to your woes and frustrations. So come to me next time you feel the need to vent your anger at the world; I shall be there to hear all that you have to complain about with patience and grace."

Robin sighed, but smiled. "Virion, your ridiculous and flamboyant attitude somehow actually amuses me. But, be careful what you say, because I may actually take you up on your offer and you may have to give up a few hours of your life listening to me and my petty complaints."

"And I shall do with patience and understanding, of this you can be sure!" the archer declared. "So be not afraid of wasting my time, Robin, because I shall always make time for our head tactician."

"Virion, I'm your *only* tactician. But thanks for the offer. I'll keep it in mind. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some other matters to take care of."

"Of course. Don't let me take any more of your time. Virion, away!"

With that, the archer swiftly got up and made his way out of Robin's tent. As the tactician was about to make some notes for himself, he heard voices outside.

"Heya Virion!"

"Ah, if it isn't Lissa! Ylisse's princess of greatest elegance and charm, how may I, Virion, help you today?"

Robin chuckled to himself. Virion continuing to be Virion. He wasn't going to deny that the archer's antics were quite amusing, especially when it came to women. Unfortunately, Robin didn't have the pleasure to see when Virion's idle flattery fell flat. That was a shame, really. He would've paid lots of money to see how that would play out. Of course, Robin was a busy man and had a lot to do today. So, he decided to cut the conversation short.

"Virion, I would advise you to immediately stop what you're doing and move on, otherwise I'll be obliged to tell Chrom that you're flirting with his younger sister."

A startled gasp and some giggles.

"Robin, all I was doing was making some polite conversation with the young princess here! However, I see how my noble intentions would be misinterpreted, so I shall now hastily depart. Farewell, dear Lissa. Virion, away!"

"Bye Virion!"

"Now that that's over, Lissa, get in here. I have some good news for you."

The princess immediately appeared in the tent.

"That's my favorite type of news!" she said excitedly. "So, what do you have for me?"

"What I have for you is...a promotion!"

"Really?! A promotion? All right!" exclaimed Lissa, before suddenly pausing and looking at the tactician. "Wait a minute. What do you mean? I'm already the princess of Ylisse. The only ones who are higher than me are Chrom and Emm. What are you promoting me to?"

"A good question!" said Robin. "See, this is more of a field promotion. I've noticed your hard work healing and teleporting and all that. Especially today. Your rescue staffing Sumia and myself right before those wyverns ate us for lunch was truly appreciated. It allowed us to live, but more importantly, it forced the wyvern riders to come within range of Virion's bow. Once that happened, they started dropping like flies. Oh yeah, you got us out from pretty far away, too. I see someone

was practicing their magic."

"You bet! I've been practicing and healing and all that other stuff to help me improve my magic skills. But, you know what? I think the Spirit Dust proba-"

"Wha-? Hey! Shhh!" Robin made various frantic movements with his arms before getting up, checking outside his tent to see if anyone heard then sitting back down.

Lissa just stared at him quizzically. "Okay, what was *that* all about?"

"Lissa, you can't just go around loudly talking about Spirit Dust!" Robin whispered. "Especially when it concerns me giving it to you."

"What? Why? You said the Spirit Dust was safe and legal!"

"I did and it is and will you keep your voice down! Look, Spirit Dust is perfectly safe and…mostly legal."

"Mostly? What do you mean, 'mostly' legal?" Lissa asked before looking suspiciously at Robin. "Did you give me illegal drugs?"

"Spirit Dust is *not* a drug!" scoffed the tactician. "It's more of a 'performance enhancing controlled substance' in that it enhances your magic potential and has no addictive properties whatsoever."

"I dunno. It sounds like a drug to me, especially how you got all nervous when I started talking about it."

"Lissa, please. If it was a drug, it would have to be addictive, bad for your health, or both. Also, I would not consciously give you illegal materials. I may be a tactician, but I'm definitely not a criminal."

"Okaaay, then how come you said this stuff was 'mostly' legal?"

"It's mostly a technicality. I've been doing some reading on Ylissean law and happened to notice that they don't technically know what to classify this stuff as. It's perfectly harmless when used right, but I gather that the lawmakers are worried about the widespread us of this stuff as a shortcut to enhance magic potential instead of actual practice and whatever. Luckily, they saw enough reason to not straight up ban this stuff. So, there you go. It's a legal thing, but otherwise total legit!"

"What happens when you don't use it right?"

"Nothing too serious. You just get headaches, start tripping balls and seeing weird things. Maybe vomiting too. But don't worry, I told you how use it right so it's all good, right?"

"Well…"

"Really? Fine. How about this: if you suddenly start having weird withdrawal symptoms, tell Chrom what I did so he can decide my punishment. There. Fair enough?"

Lissa pretended to think before laughing. "I'm just kidding, Robin! Of course I trust you. I mean, you did keep us alive all this time and seem like a pretty cool guy. I know you wouldn't do anything to hurt us."

Robin glared at the princess before sighing. "You know, I sometimes really hate you. Enough to maybe ever reconsider your promotion."

"Aw, don't be like that! Didn't you say that I did a great job out there today?"

The tactician grumbled before reaching into his coat pocket and throwing something to the princess. Once she caught it, Lissa started at it curiously.

"Hey Robin, why're you giving me a book? Oh! Is it a tome? Am I going to learn offensive magic?!"

"No. That's called a 'Second Seal'. It's basically a user manual telling you all you need to know about fighting and other such things."

"Wow! So I'm going to learn how to become a mage?" Lissa asked excitedly.

"No." Robin repeated. "That Second Seal has all you need to know about Pegasi. How to fly, take care of, mount and fight. Congratulations! You're officially being promoted to a frontline pegasus knight."

"Pegasus knight, huh? That's good too. So, how's this going to work? I just read this thing and I'm ready to ride a pegasus?"

"Not really. Reading does help, but you'll need to wait a bit. You'll still need training and learn how to fight with a spear. Once we get back to the capital, you'll get you your own pegasus so you can fly around and whatever."

"Awesome!" Lissa exclaimed. "I guess I should start now, huh?"

"Yes. Yes you should. Luckily, we have someone who can help you out. She should be arriving any minute now…"

And right on cue, a thud was heard outside the tent, followed by a groan.

"Yep, right on time." Robin said, before calling out. "Sumia, you alright?"

"F-fine." Replied the pegasus knight, before entering the tent. "Hello, Robin. Oh, and Lissa too."

"Hey Sumia."

"Yes, hello Sumia. How're you feeling?

"Much better, thanks to you. If you weren't there to fend off those wyvern riders, I would probably have a lot more than a few scratches and bruises."

"Yeah…those blasted wyverns came out of nowhere. Need to plan better next time…" Robin mumbled before shaking his head and facing the two women. "Anyway, I called you here because I have a very important task for you."

"Whatever it is, I'll do my best to accomplish it." Sumia said confidently. "Just leave it to me!"

Robin smiled. "That's what I like to hear! I like the confidence Sumia, it really suits you. Now, the details are as follows: our dear Lissa is now graduating from cleric to pegasus knight. I need you, as our most accomplished pegasus knight, to show her the ropes and ease her into the role."

"You want *me* to teach Lissa how to be a pegasus knight? Me?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't we? Wait, is that hesitation is sense?"

"Of course not! I was just-"

"Because Lissa and I have the utmost faith in you, right Lissa?"

"You bet!" chimed in the princess. "You're great out there, Sumia! Flying around and taking out the bad guys from the air. Can you teach me to do that? Please?"

Robin did his best puppy dog face. "Please?"

Sumia looked between Robin and Lissa before chuckling. "When you give me such hopeful looks, how can I refuse?"

Lissa pumped her fist in the air. "Alright! Thanks Sumia, you're the best!"

"The very best," agreed Robin. "Now, go off and the best pegasus knights that you can be!"

"Oh Robin," Sumia giggled before quickly turning around and pulling Lissa behind her. "Let's go, Lissa. Training awaits."

"Yep! Off to the skies with me. Bye Robin!" the princess waved goodbye to the tactician before exiting the tent.

Now that Robin was alone, he decided to look at his list of things left to do for the day. Surprisingly, he was already halfway through. Now he could concentrate on the one thing that was written in big, bold, capital letters, highlighted and underlined: FIND WAYS TO SECURE MORE FUNDS. That was the main thing that needed to be done. Maybe now that they were officially at war with Plegia, he could convince Emmeryn to divert some funds to the war effort. She *had* to now, no matter how much she believed in peace and diplomacy. Then maybe, Robin could finally buy some decent equipment. Above all, Robin needed new spellbooks. The kiddie spells they had now weren't doing anyone any good. If anything, they would get them all killed.

"Robin? May I have a moment?"

A voice interrupted Robin's chain of thought. He checked his list to see if he had any more meetings. No meetings. Then

again, spontaneous visits were fun. The Shepherds came to him with the weirdest problems.

"Yes, come in."

An important looking woman with a unique hairstyle came in.

"Robin?"

"Yes?"

"As our tactician, I am told that you were the one who drafted the plans for the last battle and ensured that everyone, myself included, got out safely."

"That's right."

"Well, I come to offer my sincerest thanks. If it were not for you and the rest of the Shepherds, I would still be in Gangrel's vile clutches."

"Ah, a grateful citizen! I knew this moment would come. In fact, I have a speech for just such an occasion. Let me see…" Robin reached into his sleeve and pulled out a piece of paper. "Right then. Ahem. 'Dear citizen, I thank you for your kind words. The Shepherds do everything in our power to protect those who don't have the means to protect themselves and we ask for nothing in return. However, we would not refuse a donation to help our cause. Furthermore-"

"Wait a minute, are you assuming me to be some sort of common citizen?"

"Of course. Why? Are you someone special?"

"Of course I am!" the woman said irritably. "I am Maribelle, daughter of the Duke of Themis and a Shepherd!"

Robin just stared at her blankly before pulling out his roster. After quickly glancing over it, he simply stated "Are not."

"Excuse me?"

"You're not on the list. That means you're not a Shepherd. I have the names of every Shepherd here on this roster. Your name isn't here, so you're not a Shepherd."

"This is absolutely unbelievable! Of course I am a Shepherd. You even met me in the barracks! Lissa introduced us!"

"She…did?

"Of course she did! How can you not remember something that happened only a few weeks ago?"

"To be fair, remembering stuff really isn't my strong suit. But now that you mention it, you do seem familiar somehow…"

"I would hope so! It would not reflect well on our tactician if he were to forget the people under his command."

"Yeah…I'm starting to remember you."

"Good."

"I'm also starting to remember not really liking you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You came off as that one stuck-up noble that looks down on everyone beneath her station. Now, Lissa vouched for you and all, but first impressions mean a lot. And the one you gave me wasn't good."

Maribelle huffed. "That is completely untrue. I have a keen interest in the activities of the lowborn masses. However, some of their mannerisms I find most unruly. And it does not matter what first impressions I may have conveyed. I am a Shepherd and that is a fact. I must say, I came here to offer you my thanks yet all I have been is insulted."

"Uh, I'm sorry?" Robin offered. "But you're not making yourself look any better. In fact, I'm actually thinking about letting you go."

Maribelle stared at the tactician disbelievingly. "You're firing me? Surely you cannot do so without authorization?"

"Oh, but I can." Robin replied smugly. "As head tactician, I'm actually second only to Chrom here. And I'm sure that he'll

sign off on letting you go if I phrase it correctly. He does trust me with his life, as well as the lives of his family and the Shepherds, after all."

"B-but, how? Frederick certainly-"

"Can't do a thing. If fact, I can also order him around. Did you know that I made him eat bear jerky back at Ylisstol?"

"How can that be? Frederick hates bear meat!"

"I know! I didn't think he'd do it either, but he totally did! He chomped down a handful of jerky all in one go. Was throwing up for five minutes straight, too. It was awesome." Robin laughed before clearing his throat and looking serious. "So, yes. Bottom line is I have basically free reign here to do as I see fit. And now, I probably *should* fire you. But I won't, despite an increasing urge to do so."

"You won't?"

"No. I pride myself on my professionality and firing someone just because I don't like them would be very unprofessional. So, I need to see what you can contribute to the war effort. What do you do and stuff, on and off the battlefield. Go on, convince me not to fire you."

With that, Robin leaned back and looked at Maribelle expectantly. For her part, the noble was quite surprised at the turn of events, but quickly recovered.

"Very well. I'll have you know that I perform life-saving duties on the field."

"Do tell."

"I am a troubadour. A mounted healer. I specialize in getting to the wounded quickly and healing them so that they don't suffer any life threatening injuries."

"Huh." Robin nodded and made a few notes. "Are you a man?"

"I beg your pardon?" Maribelle almost shrieked. "How did you ever come to such a ridiculous conclusion?!"

"You said you were a troubadour."

"Yes. How exactly does that translate to my being male?"

"Well, the word 'troubadour' is etymologically masculine. You called yourself a troubadour so I naturally assumed you were male. If you wanted to avoid such confusion, you would've called yourself a 'trobairitz'. You know, the female equivalent of troubadour."

"Hmph. Troubadour is the name of my class. I do not know how or why the male equivalent is used for an exclusively female class, but that is not a question that I concern myself with. That is a question for historians."

"Right. Sure. What else you got?"

"Is my being the only healer not reason enough to keep me?"

"It would be, if that were true. But we got Lissa. She's been with us longer and is very good. Why, I think…that…wait a minute." Robin paused to think for a moment. As he did so, voices could be heard outside his tent.

"Now Lissa, let's see if you can get Clair here into the air. Do you remember what I told you?"

"Yep! Now, let's see if I got this right. And…yah!"

Neighing and a flap of wings.

"Hey, I did it!"

"Great job, Lissa! Now, keep the speed slow and try to steer forward."

"Right, and…ya! WHOA!"

"Too fast! Too fast! Pull up! Pull up!"

"I'm trying! Come on! AH!"

More neighing, wing flapping and screams of terror.

Unfazed by the commotion, Robin suddenly facepalmed. "Right. That's what. I promoted Lissa so she's not a healer anymore. Well," he sighed. "Congratulations Maribelle. You are now our only healer. That exponentially increases your employability. The horse helps too."

The noble didn't seem reassured, instead looking out concernedly. "Robin, are you sure promoting Lissa was a good idea? I know she tries to make a show about doing more to help, but she isn't the strongest Shepherd around. Do you really believe she'll make a difference as a frontline fighter? It's quite dangerous out there and something terrible might happen to her."

"She'll be fine. After a few sessions, she'll be stabbing people with the best of 'em." Robin waved his hand dismissively. "I'd be more concerned about yourself if I were you. While you are an asset as our only healer, I'm going to need a bit more info to truly cement your place among us. What do you do in your free time? Do you interact with others without pissing them off? Not everyone here is of noble blood, you know."

"Urgh, must you use such vulgar language? And if you must know, yes. I make it a point to get to know my fellow Shepherds regardless of station. The more I interact with them, the more I learn about their habits and get accustomed to some of their less refined mannerisms."

Robin sighed. "See? That right there is why I'm hesitating keeping you on. You manage to talk about your fellow comrades in such a condescending manner that it makes me think you just look down on all of us. Now, I'm willing to give you a chance because Lissa vouched for you. So, that means underneath that – very prickly – exterior of yours, lies someone nice and tolerable. But I'm really struggling to see it. And you're not really selling your personality very well, either."

"I…apologize." Maribelle sighed. "I have been told that I am…difficult to get along with. However, I do value and care very deeply for the Shepherds. So, please. Let me prove it. I swear that you shall not regret your decision."

"Hm, that actually sounded sincere and convincing." Robin thought for a moment. "I suppose everyone deserves a chance. And you are our only healer, which works in your favor."

"So, I take it you're not firing me?"

"…Not at this moment, no."

"You have my eternal gratitude, Robin. I swear I shall do everything in my power to prove to you that your decision is justified."

"Yes, you are," agreed Robin. "Because I'm going to give you an assignment."

"Oh?"

"Yes. See, in the name of unit cohesion, I need to make sure everyone works together without any doubts or reservations. That they don't have moments of doubt because they don't necessarily like their battle partner. That the aforementioned doubt doesn't translate to hesitance or reluctance to act in case said partner is in danger. Now, I'm not saying that's going to happen here, but I need to plan for any occasion. So, with this in mind, I'm going to assign you a buddy."

Maribelle blinked in confusion. "I'm not entirely sure that I understand. What is the purpose of assigning me a 'buddy'? What shall they be doing?"

"Nothing serious, I'm just going to pick a random Shepherd with whom you're going to have to spend time off the battlefield. Get to know them a little more, you know? Habits, tastes, likes, dislikes and all that? Think of it as a team building exercise. If you two hit it off, that proves that you're not a snobby noble and increases your chances of surviving on the battlefield. Understand?"

"Yes. I believe I do. Your proposal makes sense. Very well, assign me any Shepherd and we shall be the best of companions in no time!"

"That's the spirit! See? I'm starting to like you more already. Now, who to partner you up with…"

As Robin was thinking, someone burst into his tent.

"Robin? Robin!"

The tactician looked up and sighed. "Hello Vaike. Still not knocking, I see. Haven't we discussed this before?"

"Yeah, you said not to bother you unless it's serious. Well, I've got a pretty serious situation now!"

Robin sighed again. "Fine. What is it? Oh, by the way, Vaike, you know Maribelle. Maribelle, Vaike."

"Oh, hey Maribelle."

"Vaike."

"Anyway, Robin. I gots a problem with my axe."

"Vaike, I swear if you keep losing you axe I'm gonna-"

"That ain't the problem! It's the opposite."

"…What?"

"My axe here?" Vaike pointed to the axe slung on his back.

"Yes?"

"It ain't attached to anything."

"…I'm not following."

"My axe's stickin' to me like a fly to honey! I woke up one mornin' and there it was! I can't get away! It's drawn to me like some kinda ghost or somethin'. I try to put it down or throw it away, but it always comes back like a boomerang and sticks to my body! I mean, Teach loves his axe and all, but this is crazy! It's really freaking me out!"

While Vaike was busy having a mini freak-out, Robin was thinking. Of course, he knew the reason for Vaike's 'situation' (and made a mental note to thank Miriel). At least this would teach the big man to finally keep his damn axe on his person. But another idea came to Robin when he turned around as looked at Maribelle. The woman was looking at Vaike with unconcealed disgust. Of course, that was to be expected. Vaike was basically everything that Maribelle opposed: crude, simple, preferring to smash instead of think, etc. He was really all that and more. And being all that, it made him the ideal candidate for Robin's experiment.

"Oh wow, that certainly is quite the conundrum you have there, Vaike. I'm not sure that I'll be able to figure it out all by my lonesome. Wait, I know! Why don't you take Maribelle to help you?"

"Really?"

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah," continued the tactician slyly. "I bet she's done a lot of reading on stuff. She's bound to know the cause of this thing and help you fix it. Why, with the two of you putting your heads together, spending time to think and consider the options, I'm sure you'll get to the bottom of this in no time! Unless, one of you objects?" Robin then looked pointedly at Maribelle.

The troubadour looked between him and Vaike a few times. Robin was sure she was going to just storm out of the tent. But to his surprise, Maribelle took a deep breath, composed herself and put on a (clearly fake) smile"

"I have no objections. I would like nothing more than to help my fellow Shepherd in his time of need. Vaike, do you have anything to say?"

"Nah. The Vaike guesses Robin knows best. So if he says that we'll need to solve this thing together, Teach defers to his judgment."

"Wonderful!" Robin clapped his hands. "Now, off you go, you two. Storm those brains and see what you come up with. I eagerly await the results."

"Right. Come on, Maribelle! I'm sure that with both of us, we'll figure this thing out in no time!"

"Yes…no time. Vaike? If you don't mind, I have something to ask Robin before I leave."

"Alright. Teach'll be right outside comin' up with solutions. Lemme know if you got anything!"

When Vaike left, Maribelle turned to Robin. "Alright, how long must I tolerate him?"

"As long as it takes. If you make it past a week, I'll think about giving you another partner."

"A-a week?" Maribelle asked weakly. She then took another deep breath. "That's fine. I have been though much worse. I can do this. It just requires patience."

"Good luck with that. And remember: you'll get a better partner if you make it to a week. Maybe."

When Maribelle left, Robin leaned back in his chair. Maybe he was being a bit too hard on her. He didn't regret the decision to partner her up with someone. What he *did* regret was that someone was The Vaike. Then again, if you start with the hardest challenge, all others become easier by comparison, right? Right. Besides, it was for everyone's own good. Thus, having solved that little dilemma, Robin decided it was time for a walk.

The tactician made a few steps outside his tent when he heard voices coming from…above?

"Lissa! You're going to fast! Slow down and pull up! PULL UP!"

"I-I'm trying! Argh!"

"No, don't do that! LOOK OUT!"

Robin's instincts immediately kicked in and he threw himself to the ground. Just in time, too, as a pegasus flew past right where his head would've been. When he thought it was safe, Robin slowly got up to see what the hell was happening. What he saw was a pegasus flying around wildly at crazy speeds. Well...that was new. Robin was starting to doubt his decision of promoting Lissa to a pegasus knight.

"Urgh, pulling uuuuuuppp!"

"Too much! TOO MU-WAH!"

"SUMIA!"

In hindsight, Robin really should've stayed back in his tent. Going outside was clearly a mistake. These thoughts occurred to him as he felt someone landing (of falling) on top of him. Both faller and fallee groaned in pain (the fallee moreso than the faller).

"Owwww…ugh. At least that wasn't as painful as I thought it would be."

"Th-that's b-because I…broke…your…fall…"

"Huh? Oh gods, Robin!"

The man in question just groaned. He groaned harder when he was turned on his back.

"Robin? Look at me. Robin!"

The tactician slowly opened his eyes. "S-Sumia? Since when were there…three of you? You're all so spinny…"

"What? Oh no, you're hurt! Please, just…calm down and don't speak. I'll go get a healer and we'll get you all back to normal." The pegasus knight sounded like she was three seconds way from total panic.

"Oh? I'm fiiiiiine. Just a bit dizzy. Gonna close my eyes for a bit. Nighty night."

"What? No! Stay with me, Robin!" Sumia's voice sounded all echoy and was getting more distant with each passing second. "Robin! Walk away from the light! Rooobiiiiiiinn!"

Robin was sure that he has suffered wounds much worse than now. He was also sure that it took a lot more than someone falling on top of him from an unspecified height to kill him. He was sure of all those things. But what he was most sure of was that he felt really sleepy and just needed a nap...and a pie. Those were his thoughts before he lost consciousness.

Chapter 12: Ricken

Hi there! What? No, I'm not dead. Thanks for asking. Yes, this update was a long time coming, but life, etc. Have a long chapter as an apology. Enjoy!

Of all the things that were to happen to him in this world, being hospitalized was not one of Robin's favorite activities. In fact, it was the opposite. Being in a state of such pain that he had to be rendered immobile and have medical treatment was a situation that Robin preferred to avoid as much as possible. Of course, them now being officially at war, there was a very real chance that the Shepherds would sustain injuries of varying degrees of grievosity. After all, that was what war was all about, and being injured was a preferable alternative to being dead. That much was obvious. Besides, if Robin got hurt, then at least he had a nice tale of heroism to tell. He was sure that when he got injured enough to warrant medical treatment, it would be because he was busy taking hits for his friends or stalling the enemy long enough for civilians to escape, or something along those lines. Of course, the world was not a perfect place and fate continued to be cruel. Robin thought these things when he regained consciousness and found himself in the medical tent. After the grogginess and nausea passed, he looked around and try to find out what happened and how long he has been cooped in here. The answers were…less than ideal.

It turned out that Sumia falling on him from gods know how high (in full armor, no less) had unfortunate consequences for his body. More specifically, he broke numerous bones, had a pretty nasty concussion and other, injuries not worth mentioning. His full diagnosis was given to him by Lissa, who was still playing the role of chief medical examiner and healer until they reached the capital and she could finally get herself a Pegasus. She also informed him that because of his injuries, he was out cold for three whole days and would need another four to fully recover.

Well…that was…huh. Robin had suffered injuries that were possibly worse than anything that had so far been inflicted on him during battle. What's more, he would be out of commission for a full week…all because one of his friends fell off her Pegasus on top of him. Now that didn't exactly make for a fine tale of bravery and heroism to tell his children. 'Hey kids, let me tell you that one time one of daddy's friends fell on him and he got hurt so bad that he was out for a week!' didn't have quite the same ring to it as 'hey kids, let daddy tell you about that one time he took on an entire group of wyvern riders by himself to buy time for the innocent civilians to get to safety!' or 'hey kids, did daddy ever tell you of that one time when he sliced and diced through a horde of Risen to get to his injured best friend and heroically drag him to rejoin the others while fighting off the Risen, with ONE HAND?' Yeah…those last two definitely sounded better than the first one. The first one sounded like one of those stories you want swept under a rug and forget it ever happened. That, or that one hilarious story that you bring up with your friends when drinking or playing card games or whatever. Everyone would remember and laugh and tease the person in question. Eventually, the person in question would also look back at this situation and laugh. To be fair, it did seem pretty funny and Robin would probably laugh if his ribs didn't hurt so much.

Well, despite the unfortunate situation in which he currently found himself in, Robin was a man who liked to look on the bright side. In this case, the bright side being that his arms still functioned as normal which meant that he could still carry out his tactician's duties as normal. Reading, reporting and planning all continued as before (but actual writing had to stop because no desk). Robin also got guests, which was always nice.

Sumia was his most frequent visitor, for obvious reasons. She felt really, really guilty about what happened, despite Robin's assurances that it was no one's fault (which was somewhat true. It wasn't really her fault but at the same time, it kinda was). So, she visited him practically every day, brought him books to read, new reports, news, gossip and, most importantly, guilt/help-you-recover-quicker pies. Gods, Sumia's pies continued to be as amazing as Robin remembered them to be. Having Sumia around was also nice. She spent time with him talking about various different things and, more importantly, books they both read and haven't read. Ah, the book discussions they had! Robin swore that by the end of his stay in the tent, that's basically all he and Sumia talked about. So much so that they decided to found a club where they read and discussed books. Now, Robin could proudly say that he was a member and co-founder of Robin & Sumia's Book Club. It made him feel all warm and fuzzy inside, having is name on something. Granted, it was a simple book club without any official papers, functions and had only two members but still! He could proudly say that he was the 'Robin' of 'Robin & Sumia's Book Club'. He was literally half the club!

Of course, Sumia wasn't the only one who visited him (she was just the most frequent one). All the Shepherds came to him at some point or another to wish him well (and make witty remarks on how he received his injuries). So, Robin could say that he did not lack company during his hospital stay. But, no matter how pleasant the company was during his hospital stay, it did not distract him from the fact that it was still a hospital stay. So, when the week was over and Robin felt neither pain nor discomfort when breathing, he was immensely glad to be discharged and back in his tent.

Robin managed to sit down before Sumia came to visit him again. She just wanted to see how he was feeling, apologize

(for the hundredth time) and drop off another pie (strawberry. Score!) Robin thanked her again, assured her that he was fine and quickly discussed the reading material for their next meeting. After saying their goodbyes, Robin relaxed in his chair. As much as he enjoyed her company, he was really glad to be back at his desk and handling his own affairs. Now, Sumia was a nice girl, she really was, but that didn't take away from the fact that she was practically a walking disaster area. Robin didn't think that there was a single time when nothing happened when she came to visit him and brought reports. The papers were either dropped in a puddle, or crumpled, or a disorganized mess, or some other thing that made them almost illegible.

It was like having a pretty but incompetent assistant. On the one hand, she was really cute and sweet. On the other hand, the assistant actually did more harm than good. But despite everything that happened and all the reports that got ruined, Sumia tried so damn hard that Robin couldn't ever get angry at her. If anything, it made him admire the effort she put and the lengths she went to. Besides, the books she brought usually survived whatever happened to her. So did the pies. The pies were key. Just like the one on his desk. Gods, Sumia's strawberry pie. She really did spoil him sometimes.

"Robin, you in there?"

The tactician looked up. Of course there would be someone coming in just when he was about to dig in. Well, whoever they were, they weren't going to stop him. Not this time.

"Yes, come in."

Chrom entered the tent as Robin was cutting himself a piece of pie.

"Hey Robin, how's my favorite tactician doing?"

"Wha-? What do you mean, 'favorite' tactician? Chrom, are you cheating on me? Have you been looking at other tacticians behind my back?"

"Of course not! Don't be crazy! I would never cheat on you with other tacticians. You're the only one for me."

"Hrmph. That's quite the denial there. It sounds like something a guilty party would say to ease his tactician's fears, before firing said tactician in favor of someone younger and better looking!"

Chrom managed to keep a straight face and raised one hand in the air. "Robin, let me swear to you here and now, as the crown prince of Ylisse, that I have no intention to replace you now or in the future. I give you my word. There, does that make you feel better?"

The tactician looked at him for a few seconds before shrugging. "I guess that'll do. Besides, there's no way you can find someone better looking than me."

Chrom shook his head and chuckled. "I see that someone has made a full recovery, his ego included."

Robin took a bite of his pie. "Mhmm. Sure did. Healing magic does wonders. So do pies. They make everything better."

"Oh yeah, I've been meaning to ask you about that. Every time I saw you, you always had a pie on you. How'd that happen? If I didn't know better, I'd say you got yourself a personal chef."

"Ha! I wish I had a personal chef. Then again, it's almost like I do. She just doesn't cook for me all the time."

"She?"

"Hm? Oh yeah, Sumia. These are her pies. They're soooo good!"

"Sumia makes pies? Huh. By your excitement, they seem pretty good."

"So very good."

"Can I have some?"

Robin stopped eating and took a long, hard look at his best friend. "Chrom, did Sumia recently fall on you?"

"What? No."

"So you didn't suffer injuries that resulted in you getting hospitalized because Sumia fell on you?"

"No."

"Then no pie for you."

"What, really? Just like that you dismiss me?"

"Sorry Chrom, but only I'm entitled to these pies. These are no ordinary pies. If they were, you'd be entitled to whatever portion you would like. But no, these are Sumia's patented guilt/get-well-soon pies. They are a result of her feeling really bad about the whole incident and something to speed up my recovery. Well, they were. The one I'm currently eating is the final apology/glad-you-got-better pie. If anything, it make this one even more special since there is going to be only one of them. So no, you can't have one."

Chrom raised an eyebrow. "Wow Robin, you've really thought about this, huh?"

The tactician shrugged. "Hey, pie etiquette is very clear about these things. I don't make up the rules."

"Alright, how about this: I'm your best friend and visited you while you were hurt. Kept you company and all that. I think I was your second most frequent visitor. Also, it was my sister who did the healing. Doesn't that at least allow me to have a small piece of the pie?"

Robin thought for a moment. "I…suppose you can get the 'best friend' slice. Although you should know that, by your logic, Lissa should also get one. Actually, the 'saved my life/healed me' slice is bigger than the 'best friend' slice."

"That's alright. Since she's not here, I'll be happy to accept the slice on her behalf. In fact, you can combine her slice with mine and we'll call it even."

Robin chuckled as he cut a piece. "Very sneaky, Chrom. You know, if the whole prince thing doesn't work out, I have a feeling you'd make a fine lawyer."

"Maybe. Then again, that's why I have you! Mmm…Mm! You weren't kidding. This pie is amazing!"

Robin smiled. "See? Told you. Sumia sure does know what she's doing when it comes to pies. She's like a master of pie chefs or something."

"She sure is." Chrom devoured his pie piece in a blink of an eye and smiled in satisfaction. "That was some good pie."

Robin cut himself another piece. "It sure is."

"Can I have another piece?"

"Chrom, you're my best friend and I love you like a brother. But don't push it. The rules of Sumia's special pies are very clearly written and you've already had your piece. Enjoy the memory and the taste. That's all you can do because who knows when or if we get another serving of special occasion pie."

"What? You can't be serious. Robin, I-wait!"

"Yes?"

"You said that you 'loved me like a brother.'"

"I did say that, yes. Why?"

"Well, if I'm not mistaken, that elevates me to the status of 'almost brother'. Correct me if I'm wrong, but that status is clearly higher than simple 'best friend' and deserves its own, separate –and proportionally bigger- piece of pie. Isn't that right?"

Robin opened his mouth to protest before actually considering Chrom's words. They did make some sort of sense. Robin did admit to having a brotherly love toward Chrom. And since he did admit this, it elevated Chrom to a new level of best frienditude and entitled him to a bigger slice of the pie. Quite literally. And no matter how much Robin thought, it all made total sense.

"Curses," muttered the tactician as he slowly cut a bigger piece of pie for his friend. "Never in a thousand years did I expect someone to use my own logic against me. Here's your slice, future attorney at law."

"Why thank you, my dear associate. I look forward to getting more pie from you in the future. Mmm…soh ghood…"

"Alright you pie stealer, did you come here to just to steal my pie or was there something else you needed?"

"Hm? What? Oh, right." Chrom finished eating his pie before clearing his throat. "Good stuff. Anyway, I wanted to see how you were doing and congratulate you on your recovery."

"Yep. As you can see, I'm perfectly fine and healed. Your visit is appreciated. Anything else?"

"Yes. Something serious. It concerns Lissa."

"Chrom, I know that you're concerned that Lissa's going to fight on the front lines soon, but I can assure you that she's ready. The Second Seal has everything she needs to know about Pegasi and Sumia's been training her in combat. By the time she'll get her own, Lissa will be ready and able to fight. She's going to be in no more danger than the rest of us. Trust me."

"No, it's not that! Well, not entirely. I *do* trust you and your judgement, Robin. You've carried us this far and given me no reason to doubt your abilities. But Lissa's deployment on the frontlines isn't why I'm here."

"Oh? Something else, then?"

"Yes." Chrom said gravely. "Our informants in Plegia tell me that there is a plot on her life."

Robin frowned. "Just her or all of you?"

"Just her. I don't know why, but if I had to guess, it's probably because they see her as the easiest target. Emm's the Exalt and guarded around the clock and I'm the leader of the Shepherds. Although we're both in camp, I'd assume that they think Lissa'll be an easier target."

"Grave news, indeed. What do you need me to do?"

"I was wondering if you could assign Lissa a bodyguard. Being our tactician, you know everyone's strengths and weaknesses and can decide who's the most qualified for this position."

"A bodyguard of Lissa? Why not just assign Frederick?"

"I've considered it. Frederick is very loyal, trustworthy and experienced. However, his loyalty is to House Ylisse. If we're all on the battlefield, I don't want his attention split between myself and Lissa. I know he'll do everything in his power to protect her, but I also know that he'll be worrying about my safety as well. That is a distraction that can prove deadly on the battlefield."

"Hm, good point. Alright, let's see here…" Robin took out his roster and mumbled to himself as he looked over it. After a few minutes, he seemed to come to a decision. "Alright, I'll assign Lon'qu."

"Lon'qu?" asked Chrom, clearly surprised.

"Yep. I finally got how to pronounce his name right. Having a week to yourself really doesn't leave that much to do. What's wrong?"

"Well…it's just…" Chrom hesitated before continuing. "I know that Basilio recommended him to us and that he's trustworthy. But..."

"Buuut…?"

"I don't know. This is my younger sister, Robin! I'd prefer someone I knew to look after her. Besides, Lon'qu seems really distant, with his gynophobia and all. Are you sure there's no one better?"

"Chrom, you came to be to find a suitable bodyguard for your sister. I am doing just that. You *do* trust my judgment, right?"

"I do, it's just…"

"Think of it this way: Lon'qu is the best candidate for this job because he's attentive, fast and deadly. He's always alert, so he'll see the assassins and their plots. He's fast enough to close the distance between himself and Lissa if the assassins come after her and he kills things very, very well. Heck, you've seen him in combat. I think you'll agree he's one of the best fighters here." Robin paused before muttering, "And it'll give Lissa something nice to look at."

"What was that?"

"Hm?"

"I didn't quite catch the last part of what you were saying."

"Oh, uh…he's very, very good at killing things?"

"No, not that. Didn't you say something else after that?"

"Nope."

"Are you sure? I swear you-"

"Nope and nope. I said that Lon'qu's good at killing things and then I stopped talking. Yep. That's totally what happened. Did not say anything else after that. Nothing whatsoever."

Chrom have Robin a questioning glace but otherwise said nothing.

The tactician cleared his throat. "Er, right. Anyway, if not Lon'qu or Frederick, who else would you trust with your sister's safety? Sumia?"

"No…"

"Maribelle?"

"No."

"Vaike?"

"Gods, no!"

"There you go. Lon'qu it is." Robin paused before adding, "I understand your concerns, but trust me, I know what I'm doing. Lon'qu's good. Lissa'll be safe with him around."

Chrom looked like he was going to say something before sighing. "Alright. The thought of someone I don't know very well guarding my sister may make me a bit uncomfortable, but he's probably the best one for the job."

Robin stood up and patted him friend on the shoulder. "I really believe he is. I'm sorry that I can't be the one to do this, Chrom. I would gladly guard your sister, but I'm working out new strategies with the people we have and that requires certain combinations in battle."

"Of course. I understand completely. Being our tactician, you know the best battle combinations and I wouldn't want to sacrifice our unit cohesion if you thought there was someone besides yourself who could guard her." Chrom sighed. "Well, I guess I'd better inform Lon'qu of his new duties."

"You want to do it yourself?"

"Yes. I think that coming from me will make it sound more official." Chorm grinned before adding, "And I think he'll be less likely to see it as a cruel joke if I tell him of his new duties."

Robin opened his mouth to protest…and promptly closed it at Chrom's pointed (and amused) look.

"Fine. You tell him. Actually, in different circumstances, this *does* sound like a joke I'd pull on him. Heh heh. The gynophobic swordsman and the cheery, outgoing princess. I bet they'd make a great comedy duo."

Chrom chuckled. "Yeah. Maybe once this whole mess is over, that's what they'll do. From what I hear, Lissa's already got started."

"Yeah…at least that way, it'll give her more people for her to focus on and I'll finally be free of her froggy reign of terror."

"One can always hope. Anyway, I'm off to tell Lon'qu the good news. It's good to have to back at full health, Robin."

"Thanks, Chrom. It's good to be at full health."

Once his friend left the tent, Robin sat back down and looked at his desk. He then sighed. Talking about the Lissa situation temporarily took his mind off of his pie. Now that Robin looked down, he realized that Chrom logiced his way into getting half of the pie. Combined with the pieces that he had already eaten, Robin only had about a small piece left. Blast. This pie was strawberry, too!

As he was lamenting the loss of most of his pie and coming up with ways to not share future pies, Robin heard someone outside his tent.

"Um, Robin? You in there?"

"Yes, come in."

Robin didn't know what to expect. The voice wasn't familiar and he didn't think he ever heard it before. Well, whatever the expectations he did (or didn't) have, Robin was certainly not prepared to see a young boy enter his tent. A young boy dressed in oversized mage garb, too.

"Uh, hey Robin. How're you feeling?"

"Better, thanks." Robin paused. "So, what're you doing here in our camp, kid? A war zone's no place for someone your age. Did you get lost or something?"

The kid looked surprised before frowning. "Hey! Don't talk down to me! I'm not a kid!"

Now it was Robin's turn to look surprised. He blinked twice, looked the kid up and down before saying, "Yes you are."

"Am not!" replied the kid indignantly.

"Are too." Robin countered. "Look, I may not know or remember much because of the amnesia, but the one thing I *do* know is that my eyes still work and generally don't lie. And what they see now is a little kid."

Before the kid could argue, Robin continued, "I mean, come on. Even you have to admit that you're the younger end of the scale. I bet you didn't even hit puberty yet, I am right?"

The kid hesitated. "Well, no...I don't think. But I'm old enough! It'll probably hit any day now. Once that happens, I'll be tall and strong and no one will look down on me ever again!"

"Sure. Whatever you say. But until this time, you're still a kid in the middle of a camp or armed individuals at war. So, seriously, what're you doing here? Lost? One of the civilians we rescued and now need escorting back to your village or something?"

"What? No! This is where I belong."

"Oh this should be good. Alright kid, I'll bite. Tell me why you think you belong in this camp full of professional soldiers preparing for war."

"Because," said the kid confidently, "I'm a Shepherd, too!"

Robin remained silent before bursting into laughter. Meanwhile, the kid just stared in confusion.

"Hey, what's so funny?"

"Y-you! What you said! A-a Shepard, you? That's…that's…" and Robin continued to laugh uncontrollably.

"It's true!" exclaimed the kid. "I'm a certified Shepherd and everything! How can you not remember? You were even there when I made my debut!"

Robin couldn't reply as he was still laughing…and continued laughing for a good few minutes afterward. Eventually, he calmed himself down enough to form coherent sentences.

"Oh, I needed that. What a great way to celebrate coming back. I get pie and a good laugh." Robin cleared his throat before continuing. "Now, let me give you three reasons why I have a hard time believing that you're a Shepherd. Firstly, I totally don't remember you doing any rescuing of Maribelle. Secondly, I have here a list of all the Shepherds. All of them. And I'd bet money that if I take a look at the roster, I'm not going to find your name. Thirdly, we need professional soldiers here. No offense, but I'm not sure you qualify for this position. I mean, all of us here have got countless hours of training and combat experience under our belts. Even Sumia, who only started fighting recently. You look like you should still be in mage school. And finally, you're just a kid. Having you go and fight in a war would be unethical. Isn't that against our code of conduct or something?"

The kid looked at Robin with wide eyes. "Okay, that's actually four things. But more importantly, how can you not remember me? Not only were you there when I helped rescue Maribelle, you were also there the night before when I asked to tag along."

Robin shrugged. "I don't know. I was probably thinking of more important things at the moment. Being a tactician calls for zoning out at certain points in order to focus on the bigger picture and upcoming battles. Or just general zoning out. Letting your mind wander really does wonders for the stress and relieving it."

"Uh…sure? But seriously, I'm a Shepherd! Come on, just look at your list. If it's as comprehensive as you say, I'm bound to be on it!"

"…Fine. I guess I'll humor you, but don't expect anything out of this." Robin said as he reached into his sleeves and looked at the roster. "Yep, just as I thought. Nothing. 'Ricken' is the only name here that I don't recognize."

"Well, you should. That's me!" exclaimed the kid.

"Look, it's not that I don't believe you, it's just that I don't believe you. 'Ricken' doesn't sound like a name for a little boy. I feel like it should belong to a barbarian or something. Someone tall, muscular and maybe wielding an axe. Definitely not a little mage kid."

"Come on! I'm not a little kid and I'm definitely Ricken!" insisted not-Ricken. "How can you be so sure that that's not me on the roster based solely on the name?"

"It's a hunch." Robin said simply. "Besides, your name may or may not be Ricken, but I'm positive that you're not the Ricken here. I already stated the reasons why."

Maybe-but-probably-not-Ricken groaned in frustration. "You know, you could just ask the other Shepherds about, right? I'm sure they'll vouch for me and we can easily sort this thing out."

"I could do that. Still doesn't solve the other problems, though. I don't think the others will appreciate my hiring a kid to fight on the frontlines."

"But you already have! What about Lissa?"

"She's royalty and Chrom's daughter! She outranks me and can do whatever she wants. Besides, not only is she not content with sitting in the castle doing nothing, she wants to help out and I don't think Chrom wants her left alone."

"How about Maribelle? You let her stay."

"She's Lissa's friend. If she wants to tag along and if Lissa wants her come, there's really nothing I can do about that. Besides, she's now going to be our only healer. That's pretty key."

"Then what about Donnel? He's about as young as me and has even less training, but is still a Shepherd."

"…Who?"

"You know, Donnel. That villager who joined us a while back?"

Robin blinked and shook his head. "See, now I definitely know that you're lying. Chrom knows better than just picking a random stranger out of the ground and letting them join the Shepherds."

"…Isn't that how you got your job?"

"Yes, but that's not the point. The point is that Chrom should know better by now. Besides, recruiting an untrained villager kid? That's just crazy talk!"

"It's not crazy talk, it's true! Just see for yourself. I saw Donnel training on my way over here."

Robin sighed. "You know, I really should stop humoring you." He then walked to the other end of his tent, pushed aside the flap and gazed out on the training grounds.

"Alright, I'm looking at the training grounds now. Where is this so…called…" Robin trailed off as his eyes fell on a figure that he did not recognize. Sure enough, the boy looked not much older that maybe-Ricken and was swinging a lace wildly trying (and failing) to hit the practice dummy right in front of him.

Robin stared unbelievingly at the kid on the training grounds. After a moment, he turned to the (other) kid in his tent. "How long has he been with us?"

"About a week."

"So, what? We've just, accepted him just like that? No background check? No skill assessment? Nothing?"

"Pretty much. Chrom thought he looked capable and trustworthy enough, so why not?"

"Just taking random people off the streets. I'm going to have a very long talk with Chrom about this. What the hell was he thinking?" Robin muttered as he made his way to his desk, took out his pen and started scribbling furiously on the roster.

As the tactician continued muttering and writing, possibly-Ricken shifted uncomfortably. He stood there in silence before slowly venturing, "Uh, are you alright?"

"Peachy." Robin stopped writing and looked up. "Since everything I thought I knew turned out to be wrong, apparently the Shepherds are now accepting applications from kids no matter how poorly trained they are. I guess that also means you're a Shepherd. Congratulations, kid. It appears you actually were the Ricken that my list was referring to."

"You bet I was. And I'm now even more officially a Shepherd. Woo!"

At Robin's dour expression, definitely-Ricken coughed in embarrassment and added, "Well hey, at least you know that I actually got some training."

"I do?"

"Of course. Before this whole thing with Plegia blew up, I was in mage school. Top of my class, too." Ricken said proudly. "Graduated to El-level spells and I'd say I'm pretty good. Want me to prove it? I brought my Elwind tome with me."

Robin suddenly perked up. "You have an Elwind tome with you?"

"Right here." Ricken proceeded to take out a green tome. "I've learned some pretty neat tricks with it. Watch, I call this one th-"

"Alright! Great stuff. Neat trick. Can I see your tome?"

"But I didn't even show you anything."

"Don't worry, I know it's simply amazing. But seriously, tome. Gimme."

Before Ricken could answer, someone quickly rushed into Robin's tent.

"Robin! Excuse the intrusion, but I simply had to see if news of your recovery were true."

"Oh, hey Maribelle!" greeted Robin, somewhat surprised. "Yeah, made a full recovery and am now fine and dandy. I didn't know you cared."

"Of course I care. When the general wellbeing of our head tactician is at stake, how could I not care? Oh, I see I'm not the only one. Greetings, Ricken. Here to inquire about Robin's health?"

"Hey Maribelle. Yeah, something like that."

"You two know each other? That's wonderful. Saves me the trouble of having to verify Ricken and all that paperwork."

"Of course we know each other. Why, just the other week dear Ricken here rescued me from the vile clutches of that Plegian king and his lackeys." Maribelle turned to Ricken and bowed. "You have my eternal gratitude, Ricken. I am forever in your debt."

The young mage blushed. "T-thanks, Maribelle. But you don't have to keep thanking me. I just did what anyone else would've done."

"Nonsense! Your actions went above and beyond what just 'anyone' would've done." The noblewoman proclaimed. "Why, if it were not for you, I would be-"

"Alright, alright." Robin interrupted. "Save your thanks and whatever for interactions that don't happen in my tent. Ricken, your saving Maribelle apparently happened and so solidifies your positon among us. Maribelle, you've been with Vaike for a week and word on the street has it that you two are getting along quite nicely. I congratulate your interaction with us 'unwashed masses' and not antagonizing yourself."

"Ah, yes. Vaike. The past week has been most…educational. It is who should be thanking you, Robin. I have learned

much after having spent time with him."

"Great! So you'd be willing to put up with him for longer, then?"

"Robin, please don't misunderstand!" Maribelle said quickly. "While I did find my spending time with Vaike educational, it is not an experience I would like to repeat. Besides, I recall that you said you would change my partner after a week if I managed to tolerate Vaike. Well, I have and it's now a week later."

"Ah. And here I thought you came to be out of the goodness of your heart and general concern for my wellbeing…"

"But of course I did! That was simply not the *only* reason I came to see you. Can one not combine a personal visit with a business one?"

"Well, when you put it that way, why not? One thing though: the details of our arrangement were that I would *consider* giving you another partner after a week. The question is, do I think you *deserve* one?" Robin asked and slid back in his chair. After a few moments of silence and observing the desperate look of Maribelle's face, he decided to spare her.

"Well, I suppose you did put up with 'The Vaike' for a full week. That probably took a lot of patience. Fine. I'll assign you someone else. Hopefully you can put all that you've learned to good use!" Robin's eyes then traveled to the other occupant in the room and he suddenly got an idea. "In fact, I've already got someone in mind. He's actually in this very tent."

Maribelle turned around then back to Robin. "Ricken?"

"Huh?"

"That's right!" said the tactician brightly. "Ricken here's our newest member to make his debut. And who better to babysi-er, show him the ropes than our resident troubadour? It'll be a cultural exchange, again, for the very first time. You two are both adept at magic and can teach each other about the ways of the commoner and the nobility. Doesn't that just sound swell?"

"Uh, Robin? I'm not actually a commo-mmph!" Ricken began to say before Maribelle quickly covered his mouth with her hand.

"Now dear, hush. Robin has assigned us to each other so why don't we make the most of it, hm? I believe it is for the best, after all. Thank you, Robin. We shall begin our 'hanging out' post-haste!"

"Wait! Before you go off and do whatever, I'm going to have to ask Ricken to hand over his Elwind tome."

"What? Why?"

"Now Ricken, don't go questioning Robin. He's our tactician and wouldn't be asking if it wasn't important. Let's just give him the tome and be off on our way." Maribelle said quickly before taking the tome from Ricken's hands, handing it to Robin and proceeding to drag Ricken out of the tent. "Alright, there you go. Now, we're off to get better acquainted. Goodbye, Robin!"

"Uh, yeah. Bye." Ricken said confusedly as he was being dragged outside. "Maribelle, are you alright? You're acting very strange…"

"Ricken, I shall explain everything later. But for now, I need you to play along."

"Play along with what? What's happening?"

"Not here. Come along."

The conversation continued, but Robin stopped paying attention a while ago. Now, the only thing that mattered was the tome in his hand. An Elwind tome. And *Elwind* tome. As in, a tome with stronger wind powers. One that he could finally use effectively against enemy wyvern riders and actually kill them instead of just pissing them off. Oh, the possibilities! Just the thought of actually killing wyvern riders with one hit got Robin excited for their next skirmish. Now, he would show them! Now, he had a proper weapon against wyverns that wasn't the stock wind tomes that did absolutely nothing! Oh yes, the next time he met wyvern riders in combat, he would be ready and waiting to knock them out of the sky! He would actually kill them before they got close enough to try and bite his face off. Gods, to think that Robin actually considered shelling up the cash and buying overpriced wind tomes from the merchants. Now, he had one for the very reasonable price of nothing. How he loved it when things came together!

"Robin? Permit me to enter."

"Hmm? Oh, come it."

Right. He was still at work. Fictional wyvern slaying would have to wait.

Miriel entered the tent.

"Robin, it is good to see you back in full form."

"Thanks Miriel. I'm touched that you care. Now, what brings you to my humble abode?"

"I'm glad that you asked," said the mage as she deposited a stack of papers on Robin's desk. "My visit today concerns the assignment you have given me and its results."

"Uh…" Robin looked at pile of documents warily. "That sure is a lot of writing, Miriel. Have you brought the entire report of your investigation?"

"A copy, yes."

Robin turned to look incredulously at the mage. "A copy?! There's hundreds of pages here! And they're all handwritten! Did you just write your report twice?"

"Thrice."

"Thrice?!"

"Thrice." Miriel repeated. "I like to have all my reports and findings on paper and in triplicate, in case something unfortunate were to transpire to the original. It would be most inconvenient if I were to look back on some of my work only to find it damaged or missing. Most unacceptable."

"Uh…huh. Right. Well, moving on. I see this is about Stahl's averageness. Right. I did give you that one, didn't I?"

"Indeed. It was a most fascinating and productive assignment. I must thank you for giving me this valuable subject to research."

"Hey, that's me! A well bursting with scientific…assignments and…stuff." Robin cleared his throat. "So, what did you find?"

"It was the most peculiar thing." Miriel said as she took out her own copy of the report. "I was aware of Stahl's reputation of complete and utter averageness. However, to get to the source, I had him perform a few routine exercises and recorded the results. They can be found on page 55."

Robin flipped to the indicated pages.

"As you can see, the results of his training are written next to the activity he performed. Of course, it is insufficient to have one sample. If one is to conduct a proper investigation, there needs to be something to compare the control sample to."

"Right…"

"Thus, I have decided to observe and record the training regimes of all Shepherds. Those can be found here, on page 114. As you can see, there are areas where certain Shepherds excel and others lag. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses in one area or another. Now, when you take those results and compare them to Stahl's performance, you notice something truly peculiar."

"He performs at the exact median."

"Precisely. Be it arm strength, running, stamina, or anything else, he is perfectly average. If I didn't know better, I'd say that my methodology was flawed. It's something of a scientific miracle that he manages to be so completely unoutstanding."

"But how can that be?" asked Robin. "There has to be an explanation! He can't just magically be average at everything… can he?"

"He is average, but not by magical means. I have also been puzzled by these results. However, the answer shall soon become clear. If you would skip to page 194."

"Right. What am I looking at?"

"Those graphs are the results of my observations of various Shepherds performing different training exercises. I have compiled the results and drawn them in a graph. Each one of these graphs illustrates which training exercises undertook, for how long and the results. Now, if you would please look at figure 3.6 on page 230. This graph illustrates the amalgamation of all the exercises of all the Shepherds and the results achieved."

"Okay…"

"As you can see, Stahl remains at the very center of the graph and at the top of the bell curve. That would reinforce his position as perfectly average. But, to understand how that happened, we must turn the page and focus on figures 4.0-6.5. As you can see, there is Stahl's performance over the weeks and the results. The line in the middle gradually increases as he trains and improves his skills."

Robin nodded. "Yes, that is to be expected. You train and improve. What makes him so special?"

"Ah, that becomes clear when you compare his results with that of the other Shepherds. Do you notice a pattern?"

Robin looked down at the various different graphs. At this point in time, he *really* wished he was smarter. It took all of his effort to look at the graphs and not at Miriel's observations written neatly on the sides. Gods, he knew that if he started, he would get lost trying to decipher what the hell she was saying. Oh well, at least graphs were easy. Speaking of which…

Robin leaned closer to see if his eyes were deceiving him. He then turned to look up at Miriel.

"It's true," said the mage. "As you can see, Stahl's gradual improvement has directly affected the other Shepherds. In fact, as he has trained and honed his skills, other Shepherds have trained by the exact same amount. Thus, their improvements were directly proportional to that of Stahl. So, despite all of his training, the other Shepherds improved by the same amount, keeping Stahl as the exact mean."

"But…how?"

"My conclusion is that everyone in the army is aware that Stahl is the most average soldier. Therefore, when they see him improve, they feel compelled to improve as well. In this way, they are able to avoid falling below the expected mean."

"Wow," breathed Robin. "That sounds crazy yet makes total sense."

"Indeed."

"So…based on these graphs here, you pushed Stahl pretty hard."

"It was all in the pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, I have chosen training regimes that are within his ability. It would be counterproductive for the investigation if he were to suddenly collapse from exhaustion."

"Well, that makes sense, I guess." Robin thought for a moment before an idea came to him. "Wait, so your research says that Stahl is the exact median and that everyone improves as he does, right?"

"That is my conclusion, yes."

"Excellent. I can use this." Robin rubbed his hands gleefully. "I can weaponize this after all. All I need to do is push Stahl to his limit. This way, everyone improves. It's genius! Miriel, you have done us a great service this day. I must thank you."

The mage adjusted her glasses. "Nonsense. It was all in the pursuit of knowledge and answers. You gave me an interesting area of research and I conducted my investigation."

If Robin didn't know better, you would've thought that Miriel smiled just then. Of course, being Miriel, that was preposterous. She didn't smile. Robin actually thought her physically incapable of doing so.

"I thank you for giving me this field of research, Robin. If you have any more suggestions, I would be interested to hear them."

"Hm? Oh, yes. Well, there was one thing I had in mind. But before that, tell me: you observed all the Shepherds training, right?"

"That is correct."

"Great. So, where do I fall in this whole thing?"

"Overall, your performance was…here." Miriel pointed to a dot on the graph.

Robin looked down and felt quite proud of himself. "Huh, not too shabby! Above average all around! Yeah."

"Of course, this was prior to your incapacitation."

The smile quickly disappeared from his face. "What?"

"These results include the harder training regimens that the Shepherds have undertaken in the past week. The same week that you have spent in the healing tent. Consequently, you have not improved as all the others have."

Robin felt his heart sink. He also dreaded asking the next question, but he just had to know.

"Alright, so taking into account my absence from the training scene, where am I now?"

Miriel approached his desk and looked at the graph. "By my estimates, your absence has dropped your performance to about…here."

"What?! But that puts me barely above Stahl!"

"Indeed. Actually, taking into account all of the baked pies you have eaten and your lack of exercise, you would more likely be here."

Robin looked to where Miriel pointed to and slumped in his chair. "I-I'm below average?!"

"That is most likely, yes."

This was clearly unacceptable. Robin couldn't be 'below average'! He just couldn't! He was the Shepherds' tactician. As such, he was supposed to be fighting with his friends on the front and keeping them alive and stuff. He couldn't very well do that if we was below average. If anything, they would have to bail him out and he would become the biggest factor that had to be accounted for when he considered things going wrong. This situation had to change and Robin knew exactly what he needed to do to change it.

With his mind made up, he steeled himself and got up.

"Miriel, I thank you for your findings. I shall hold on to this copy of your report for further consultation. You also have my permission to continue pushing Stahl to his limits as this improves us all. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to some training to do and get out of being below average."

"Robin, hold a moment!"

"What is it, Miriel? The longer we talk here the more substandard I become!"

"I understand and shall not keep you. I simply wished to inquire whether you had any more suggestions for future investigations that I may pursue."

"I remember I did have something…" Robin thought for a moment. "Of course, that was before the shocking revelations about my substandardness. Wait, yes! I totally did have something for you. Kellam? Kellam! KELLAM!"

"You called?"

"GAH!" Robin shouted in surprise and jumped back ten feet as the knight suddenly materialized right next to him. "Dear Naga! I knew that was coming but it still scared the crap out of me! Man, you have to stop doing that."

"Sorry. But you just-"

"Don't care and doesn't matter." Robin interrupted. "Now, since I'm becoming more substandard with each passing second I spend talking to you here, I'm going to keep this short. Kellam, you have an uncanny ability to remain unnoticed despite the stupidly large armor that you wear everywhere you go. Miriel, you like find answers to questions. My assignment to you, should you choose to accept it, is to find out how Kellam here manages to disappear while not actually disappearing."

Miriel adjusted her glasses. "Yes, I was aware of this peculiar phenomenon for quite some time. However, I was otherwise preoccupied with other matters to investigate it fully. This topic merits further investigation. I accept."

"Great. Wonderful. Miriel, you have my permission to do anything and everything in your power to solve this great

mystery." Robin then turned to Kellam. "And you shall do everything she asks of you no matter how small or nonsensical. In order to truly understand your special ability, Miriel must have unimpeded access to the you. Any questions?"

The knight shifted uncertainly. "Um, I actually yes, I was wondering i-"

"Alright! No questions! Great! Let the experiment begin! Class dismissed and all that! I look forward to seeing what you two come up with!" and without waiting for either of them to reply, Robin shot out of his tent and made his way to the training grounds.

'Substandard', 'below average', 'liability' and other such words swirled in Robin's head and fueled his resolve to get better. His pride would not allow him to remain below the accepted median levels of Stahl. He clearly needed to improve hard and fast before their next skirmish. Luckily, Robin knew exactly how to do so.

"Frederick! Frederick!"

The knight raised an eyebrow as Robin ran up to him. "Robin? I see you've made a full recovery. Whatever is the matter? You look like you're running away from the entire Plegian army."

"Yes…thanks…have serious problem…need…help…" panted the tactician.

"I will do anything you require of me." Frederick declared. "How can I help?"

"I…need you to…train me."

"Train you? I fail to see how this is a serious problem."

"It is. Trust me. Long story short: I've been away being all injured while others carried on like before. I need to catch up. And I need *you* to help me catch up. Give me a training regimen and put me through my paces and whatever. Can you do that?"

Frederick looked at Robin with a stern expression before smiling (and slightly scaring the tactician in the process). "I'm glad that you're finally taking your training seriously, Robin! When you ask me like that, how can I refuse? I shall create a training schedule for you that shall have you fit in no time!"

"That's great! Thanks, Frederick"

"My pleasure. In fact, you are in luck."

"Hm? Why?"

"Because you are just in time for my Fanatical Friday Fitness Funstravaganza! It is the most grueling, challenging and difficult weekly training session overseen by me. There usually aren't many volunteers, but I'm sure that more will become inspired to join and follow your example!"

Robin blanched. All of his survival instincts were screaming at him to forget this whole silly thing and get the hell out of there. Frederick looked like he was going to inflict an unending hell of physical training that would result in tremendous pain to Robin's person. Robin hated pain to his person! The rational part of his mind told him that this was not worth it and that he could train by himself to slowly get back to the level he was at before. Of course, there was also the stubborn and prideful part that refused to be labelled as 'substandard' and *demanded* he go through with this despite the (very likely) outcome being in a substantial amount of pain. And in the battle of reason vs stubborn pride, the latter usually won because apparently Robin liked to make himself suffer. So, he was going to train and become above average…or die trying. With Frederick personally overseeing his training regimen, dying seemed like a very real possibility. Thus, having made up his mind, Robin slowly took a deep breath, put on a brave face and uttered the words he was sure he'd regret:

"Alright. Let's do this."

Chapter 13: Donnel

Spent a bit longer on this than I initially wanted. But hey, new chapter!

Pain. Death. Pain *and* Death. Robin was familiar with both of these concepts. For obvious reasons, he was more familiar with one than the other. Not having experienced death himself, Robin had no idea what to make of it. He did read many books and theories concerning the matter and what could happen after death. There were many different opinions and viewpoints that Robin found absolutely fascinating and could spend hours and hours reading. Of course, in the end they were nothing but conjecture and theories. No one really knew what happened after death. But the theories were interesting to read regardless.

Now pain was a concept that Robin grew intimately familiar with. More so the longer he lived and discovered his new life. Losing his memories was a blessing, in a way. Since he didn't have anything before Chrom found him lying in that field, Robin really didn't have any experiences to draw upon and no unpleasant memories of any kind. Everything was new to him. The obvious downside was that he experienced all the unpleasantness of the world for the first time, again. That included pain. And the longer he lived and remembered, the more memories he made. And an equal number of those memories had their share of joy and pain. Joyful memories included friendship, a sense of belonging, purpose, camaraderie, and Sumia's pies. Painful memories included Risen, wyverns, Lissa, Lissa's pranks, and his most recent hospitalization. Well, as all things, new memories came in a bundle. And Robin was very happy with the bundle he had.

Now, as any normal person, Robin would not usually spend much time thinking about death, dying and the way he would die. But Robin was not a normal person. He was a tactician in charge of an elite fighting force in what was now at war. And given these circumstances, the tactician had to consider all possibilities up to and including his own manner of death. Robin considered this when appropriate. He sometimes wondered if it would be painful. Probably yes, all things considered. He also drew up various scenarios and took many factors into account. What he hypothesized was that the most likely thing to kill him would be wyverns and their riders with Risen coming in at a close second. And Risen only because of the fact that they felt no pain and if they were to swarm him. Wyverns were more likely because they were big, ferocious, had someone riding them and wielding an axe, and the fact that they scared him from the few encounters he had with them (as a joke, Robin briefly played with the idea of Risen riding undead wyverns - he then quickly dismissed it because that was the stuff of nightmares). Truth be told, his wyvernphobia mostly came from the fact that he had (up until now) no effective weapon to deal with them. Who knew? His newly acquired Elwind tome could be the weapon that would finally tip the scales. He just needed to test it.

So those were Robin's musings about the possible things that would kill him. Enemy action. Probably wyverns and that it would probably be painful (depending on the level of dismemberment). Yet, there was something that occurred within the immediate future that made him completely reconsider everything. Perhaps, probably, he would not die as a result of enemy action. No. He would die because of someone close to him. A fellow comrade would kill him. It would be slow, deliberate and carefully planned out. And it would be super effective. Now that Robin stood on legs that felt like wet noodles and felt an incredible pain throughout his whole body, Robin knew. He knew who would be the death of him. In fact, he was staring him right in the face.

Frederick was his name and killing Robin slowly was his game.

"That's enough for today! Good job, everyone. You can all relax now."

"Argh!"

Robin's legs finally gave in and he collapsed face first with a painted grunt. It was a well-known fact that Frederick was a tough taskmaster, but they had to find a whole new set of words to describe what Robin went through. In fact, Robin was actually starting to think that Frederick was not human, but actually a secret hell demon sent from the deepest depths of hell to torture the living. And that meant him – Robin – more than anyone else. That had to be the only explanation, because it took someone who was definitely not human to devise such a "workout" routine. It took someone with the highest levels of sadism and who loved to see the suffering of others.

The "routine" was an ingenious method of torture: pushing those unfortunate enough to be partaking in it to their limits and to the point where their bodies were at breaking point…yet keeping them juuuuust below said breaking point. After a while, Robin thought that his whole body would stop working and he would die. Yet, the way in which the workout was organized, Robin continued being at that threshold until the end without ever passing it. It really took a special kind of evil to conceive of such a thing and then submit their friends to it. And currently, there were only three other people stupid or insane enough to willingly submit themselves to this torture.

Chrom was here, obviously. Being the leader, he liked to lead by example. It also helped that he was the strongest

Shepherd and in peak physical condition. And where Chrom went, his self-designated 'rival' followed. This included following him to the workout from hell. But Vaike was himself was quite physically fit and thus possessed the endurance, strength and stamina required to make it through this thing without wanting to die. Then there was Sully, the 'woman to end all men' as she was known. Always looking to improve her abilities and prove to others (as well as herself) that she was one of the toughest Shepherds here. Considering how many hours she spent training, it really wasn't surprising that she would volunteer for Frederick's Hellish Training Regime From Hell.

So, the only people insane enough to put themselves through the hell that was Frederick's extra training sessions were the strongest and most physically fit members of the Shepherds. And then there was Robin. Not terribly muscular, having an average build and stamina. Putting himself through a regime that had even the strongest members breathing heavily after they were done. For the hundredth time that day, Robin asked what the hell he was doing there. And for the hundredth time, his mind reminded him of what needed to be achieved. And he would improve himself! Pain be damned!

And pain there was aplenty. Robin felt like he had gone a dozen rounds with Chrom, was chewed by about two dozen wyverns, spat out and then hacked at by a horde or Risen. He didn't know that it was possible to feel so much pain within such a short amount of time. His whole body was sore. His muscles burned and breathing hurt. But those were good signs, right? The saying goes "no pain, no gain". And Robin felt an indescribable amount of pain. That meant that he gained a lot, right? Of course it did! Robin chose to believe that will all his being. Otherwise, the fact that he went through so much for nothing would push him over the edge into doing something *really* dumb. Well, dumber than signing up for the extra training. *That* was pretty dumb in the first place!

"Robin."

The tactician groaned but otherwise remained as he was: face down on the ground.

The voice chuckled. "I am just here to congratulate you. You have held up remarkably well for your first time. And in my extra-long training session, too. Only collapsing at the end is better than most recruits."

Robin groaned again before speaking. "Frederick, you're the devil, you know that? Only someone truly depraved could come up with a training regimen as diabolical as what I just went through."

"Well, it's true that my weekly Friday sessions are not for beginners. However, you have performed extremely well. After a few more sessions, you'll feel that you can complete this training regimen with little to no effort at all."

Before Robin could answer, a voice interrupted. "Whoa there, Frederick. I wouldn't go that far if I were you. I think that one more session like this will kill him."

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence, Chrom." Robin said dryly. It might've been true, but he wasn't going to let them know that.

Chrom chuckled. "Robin, I have every bit of confidence in your abilities. But when you look like you're struggling to breathe and it seems like simply standing takes all your energy, I'll have to err on the side of caution. I understand you want to improve, but pushing yourself so hard, especially after you've just recovered, seems a bit excessive."

"Being excessive is just another way of being devoted." Robin replied. "Besides, I'll be fine. Just need to…lie down here for a bit and wait until the searing pain subsides. Then you'll see. You'll all see!"

"Robin, I'd be more inclined to believe you if you weren't saying that lying face down on the ground."

"It's very comfortable down here."

"Har! I remember my first Frederick training session!" a third voice exclaimed. "The pain, tiredness and aches. That's how you knew you were improving!"

"See? Sully knows. The amount by which I improve is directly proportional to how much pain I feel." Robin said matter-of-factly. "And right now, I'd say that I've improved *lots.*"

"Sully, please don't encourage him," said Chrom. "Otherwise, he'll be doing more lying down on the ground that actual fighting or planning."

"But we do admire your dedication to self-improvement." Frederick praised. "To throw yourself into the most difficult of my training regimes is quite commendable."

"Urgh. Yep, that's me. All about improving the self. Even at the expense of my health…"

"That's one hell of a drive you got there, Robin. Pretty impressive. And for your first time, you're still doing better than some *others* that we know." Sully smirked. "Right, Vaike?"

"Hey!" Another voice entered the conversation. "The first time Teach took Frederick's crazy training regime, he just wasn't ready."

"You sure about that?" asked Sully. "You sure it just wasn't too intense for you?"

"There ain't no such thing as being 'too intense' for The Vaike! I eat training courses for breakfast no matter how though they are! It's just sometimes, 'ol Teach needs something to wet his appetite before gettin' to the main course."

"Alright you two." Chrom interjected. "There's no need to argue over this. We're all veterans of Frederick's training sessions and that makes us all equal…including you, Robin. You survived. Congratulations!"

"Woo-hoo." Robin tried to wave his hand to complement his sarcastic remark. When that proved to be too painful, he settled on continuing to lie face down on the ground.

Frederick cleared his throat. "Well then, we have all trained very hard today. Now, shall we wash up and get some food?"

"Hell yeah! I could always go for some food after such a thorough training session."

"Such intense training works up Teach's appetite. Let's eat!"

Chrom chuckled and then looked down. "Robin? You coming?"

"Uh, you know what? You guys go ahead. I think I'll just…lie here for a while and enjoy the softness of the…ground. Yeah."

"Robin, do you need any help…or some medical attention? I'm a bit worried."

"Oh, I'll be fine! It's just one of those post-training things, only about a thousand times worse. Just give it time and I'll be off the ground walking around like normal in no time!"

"You're sure it's nothing serious? We could always carry you to the dining tent or something."

"I'm positive. Just give it time. They say it heals all wounds. Since it's a saying, it has to be true!"

Sully spoke up before Chrom could say anything else. "Come on, Chrom. Leave the man be. I remember when I was in his shoes. The pain, the tiredness, the sweat. It's something that you have to overcome to prove yourself *to* yourself."

"Uh, yeah! That's totally it. Thanks for understanding, Sully."

Chrom still looked unsure. "Robin, you're positive that nothing's wrong?"

"Completely! So you guys go off and have fun. I'll join you later. But before you to that, there *is* something you can do for me."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. See, I don't think I'm in any condition to do much of anything right now, so could you turn me over and pour a bucket of water or two over me?"

"You…want us to pour water over you? Why?"

"Well, we just went through a very tiring training session and I am now pretty much drenched in my own sweat. And since I'm going to be lying here on the ground for the foreseeable future, I figure this is the closest thing to a wash that I'm going to get." Robin said matter-of-factly. "So, you know. Mind lending me a hand?"

"Robin, you're being ridiculous. Why don't we just help you up and t-"

"ALL SET! Robin, get ready for The Vaike's bucket shower technique!"

Chrom looked up in time to see Vaike run up and quickly pour all the water out of the bucket he was carrying right onto Robin.

"There. Now aint' that refreshin'?" Vaike laughed triumphantly.

"Vaike? What was that?!"

"What? My good friend Robin here asked to a favor. Teach went off and fulfilled that favor. Chrom, did you forget how Teach goes the extra mile for his friends?"

"That's not the point! Why would you go off and do something like that when we-"

"Relax, Chrom. I'm fine."

"What?"

"I said I'm fine." Robin repeated. "Vaike did exactly what I asked. And while I feel better and appreciate the gesture, 'The Vaike' is not very good at listening to instructions and thus missed one very important bit of information."

"Yeah…little details have never been the Vaike's specialty. I just like go straight into things, hard and fast! Wha'd I miss?"

"The part where I was supposed to be facing up BEFORE you soak me! I mean, yeah my back feels better and all, but it's my front that needs the water!"

"Oh. Sorry 'bout that. Here, Teach'll just grab another bucket and-"

"No need." Vaike turned to see Sully already holding a bucket of water. "Now step aside and let a knight properly handle this. Frederick, you want to turn Robin over?"

"Certainly." Frederick proceeded to kneel down, carefully turn Robin around and spread his limbs. "There. You are now in the most optimal position to spread the water throughout your whole body. Sully, you may proceed."

"So, how to you want you bucket shower, Robin? Take it slow or go up to full force?"

"I'm a big boy, Sully. Give it to me at full force. Hit me with your best shot!"

"Har! That's what I like to hear! Now remember: you asked for this!"

Robin took a deep breath and closed his eyes as Sully swung back the bucket. He then felt the impact of very cold water on his face and body. After the initial shock, Robin actually found it quite soothing. It certainly helped cool him down and wash away all the sweat.

"So, that forceful enough for you?"

Robin let out a relaxed sigh. "So…good. Thanks, Sully."

"Glad to help."

Chrom sighed. "Really now, was that necessary?"

"It wasn't only necessary, it was *very* necessary." Robin replied. "I now feel a lot less bad. So, yeah. Going to continue lying here and drying under the sun. You guys go ahead and do your stuff without me. I'll catch up...sometime."

"You heard the man, Chrom! Now let's go wash up and eat! The Vaike feels like he could eat a mountain of meat!"

Chrom looked down at Robin one last time before shrugging. "Well, I guess you've made up your mind. We'll be off, then. Have fun on the ground."

"Oh, don't worry, I shall. There isn't anything better after a long workout than lying in the sun! Ha ha ha…" Robin waited until the group left before wincing in pain. True, his impromptu 'shower' did help him feel better. It was extremely refreshing after spending an ungodly amount of time in under the sun doing extreme exercises. But that still didn't mean that he wasn't still sore, and equal parts tired and hurt. Robin didn't think he would be in any condition to move for the at least the next few hours. Maybe even for the whole day. Hm, maybe seeking some kind of medical treatment wasn't such a terrible idea after all…

"Robin?"

The tactician looked up (or ahead, as it were). "Oh, hey Miriel! What can I do for you?"

"I was merely passing by. May I enquire as to why you are positively drenched and lying on the ground?"

"Oh, you know. Doing a bit of resting under the sun. Took part in Frederick's Fanatical Friday Fitness Funstravaganza today. Then a shower. So I'm just a little bit tired."

Miriel looked at him quizzically. "Frederick's Fanatical Friday Fitness Funstravaganza is the most grueling training session usually reserved for the strongest Shepherds. In your current state, taking part is highly inadvisable as the likely outcome would entail a tremendous amount of stress and pain on your person. For what reason did you decide to participate in such a punishing activity?"

"Well, it's mostly because of you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, after you presented me your findings concerning Stahl's averageness and the shocking revelation of my subaverageness, I just couldn't let that stand. So, I figured what better way to improve than to tackle the toughest, hardest, most difficult training session known to Ylisse?"

"I can suggest at least a dozen alternate ways that you could have improved your performance without compromising your ability to function."

"Yeah, but this one was the fastest one." Robin said surprisingly cheerily. "Besides, nothing's compromised. I should be back to full form…sometime in the near future. But that's not the point. The point is: how did I do?"

"…Can you elaborate?"

"How did I do? I've just trained myself silly for a good few hours. That has to count for something, right? Improving my performance and such? I just need to know by how much."

"Ah. As I do not have my notes on me, the best I can do is offer a rough estimate on your performance."

"I'll take it."

"Very well." Miriel adjusted her glasses and thought. "Based on your physical condition and the exercises that you have done, multiplied by the time you have trained, divided by…carry the one…subtract four…" she then trailed off for a few minutes before finally clearing her throat. "I can say that, by my rough estimates, your performance is now slightly above that of Stahl."

"Ha ha!" Robin laughed triumphantly. "I knew it! This was totally the right course of action! I am now slightly above the accepted norm. Now all I have to do is push myself at this rate and I'll be back to being upper-middle performer!"

"Robin, while your dedication is laudable, I would strongly advise against continuing training at your current pace."

"What? Why? Because of my current predicament? That'll pass!"

"No. Continuing at your current pace would exponentially increase the odds of your sustaining grievous and/or paralyzing injuries that will affect you for the rest of your life. That, or simply dying from exhaustion."

"Huh." That certainly gave Robin pause. Coming from Miriel it had to be true. She knew what she was talking about. "Fine. I'll think about it. In the meantime, do you have anything that can help me not be in a state of constant pain? I'd still like to tough it out, but something that helps me tough it out would be greatly appreciated."

"Actually, I do have something that will alleviate your pain." Miriel said before taking out a vulnerary. "Here."

"A vulnerary? Really? No offense Miriel, but I think I may need something a bit stronger. You have an elixir by any chance?"

"I do not. Even if I did, I would not offer it to you."

"I would be offended if I didn't know you had a very good reason for doing so."

"Indeed. All healing items have different properties to handle injuries of varying severity. Being the strongest, elixirs are reserved only for injuries of the life threatening variety. To use an elixir to alleviate your current pain would result in some unpleasant side effects."

"Define 'unpleasant'."

"Side effects may include but not be limited to: headaches, nausea, migraines, stomach pains, vomiting, explosive

diarrhea, dizziness and loss of bladder control. Just to name a few."

"Uh…huh. I'm just not going to ask how you know this. So, a vulnerary, then?"

"That is what I would advise, yes."

"Alright. Just need to…get…arm…to…move!" Robin used all of his remaining strength and willpower to raise his arm, grab the vulnerary and bring it to his mouth. "Ah-ha! Success!"

"Congratulations. You should feel the effects in a few minutes. Now, if you excuse me, I should be off to continue my investigation into Kellam's ability to disappear. Farewell."

"Great. Thanks, Miriel!"

As he watched the mage leave, Robin continued lying on the ground waiting for something to happen. The soreness and pain from his muscles was starting to fade somewhat. Not enough to actually totally make him feel better, but enough for him to move his limbs without it requiring every last bit of effort. After a while, Robin actually felt good enough to slowly get up on his feet. Well, 'good' was subjective. The pain and soreness were still there, except now that he could feel them less, Robin noticed that he felt very, very tired. But that was alright. All he needed to do now was to slowly and carefully make his way back to his tent and sleep the rest of the day away. As long as nothing else happe-

"Robin!"

"Huh? Wh-ACK!"

Of course, nothing would ever be that simple. Ever. Now, Robin found himself as he was a few moments ago: lying face down on the ground (for the second time that day), with all the good feelings from the vulnerary replaced by the pain from before, except now there was somebody lying on top of him and wrapping him in a very painful hug.

"Argh! Whoever you are, I surrender! Just let go before you kill me!"

Robin heard a girlish giggle on top of him. "Oh Robin, dramatic as ever, I see."

"Damn it, Lissa! I'm serious! Let go! Letgoletgoletgoletgo you're killing me argh!"

"Hmph. Party pooper." Huffed the princess before obliging and getting off the hapless tactician.

Robin moaned in both pain and relief.

"Robin, you're all wet! And…you don't look too good. What gives?"

"Yes, I'm wet. I commend your astute observation," remarked the tactician dryly. "As for my current not looking too good, you can thank Frederick and his Friday training nonsense. It was my brilliant idea to take part."

Lissa snorted. "Ha! Yeah right!"

"What?" Robin said indignantly. "It's true!"

"Robin, Frederick's Fanatical Friday Fitness Funstravaganza is a crazy weekly workout that only the toughest and craziest would take on. I really don't think you fall into either of those categories. So I don't believe you."

"I may not be the toughest or the craziest, but I'm definitely the stupidest as I actually thought it would be a good idea. And now I'm hurting all over again, thanks to you. To what do I owe at unprovoked assault?"

"Oh, well that was just my way of thanking you."

"I dread to think of what you'll do if you decide to spite me if *that* was your way of thanking me. But, I'll bite and ask: what are you thanking me for?"

"Chrom came and told me about the plot on my life. He also said that he'll assign Lon'qu to be my bodyguard. Lon'qu will have to guard me around the clock. Twenty-four seven." Lissa paused before adding. "And I've been told that I have you to thank for that."

"You're welcome. I've gotta say, for having just found out that there's plot on your life, you're taking it surprisingly well."

"Oh sure, that part's a bit of a bummer. But! I have the coolest, bestest and fastest warrior watching over me. With him as

my bodyguard, I think I'll be just fine."

"Well, glad that you're staying positive, I guess. And I suggested Lon'qu because he truly is those things you have just said."

"Isn't he? He is. He's also soooo dreamy!" Lissa swooned. "I love watching him train. The way he swings his sword and so cleanly cuts through the practice dummies is just…so…"

"I wouldn't know," interrupted Robin, not wanting to head down this road. "But I did think you'd appreciate having him around. Your little crush is just a nice bonus that makes his appointment all the better."

"Yep. So, thanks again! If you need anything, just ask!"

"Try not to die. Do that, and we'll call it even."

"Deal. Now, if you excuse me, I'm off to find Lon'qu. Chrom probably told him the good news and I want to make sure he starts his new job as soon as possible."

"Actually, Lissa? Do you think you could-"

"Bye!"

And with that, Lissa was off and Robin found himself alone on the ground. It was times like these that Robin cursed his luck, or lack thereof. If only he had another vulnerary on him. If only he had his coat. His coat had everything for every occasion. He made sure of it. But at this moment in time, it was also hanging on the tree that Robin hung it on before he starting training. And said tree was still quite a long ways off from his current position. Even longer since he now couldn't move again. Damn it. His only shot now was to wait until someone stumbled upon him and he could ask them to-

"Let's see, if I add a few more teaspoons of sugar I should be able to m-WAH!"

"ACK!"

When Robin said he hoped that someone would stumble upon him, he didn't mean it literally! Now, he was still lying on the ground with yet *another* person on top of him. It certainly didn't make his current predicament any better. In fact, it was the opposite! Having fallen on him, this person only made Robin's body hurt more! Robin extra cursed his luck today.

"Oof, I guess that's what I get for walking and reading…ouch."

Robin didn't need to see to know who that voice belonged to. He'd spent a good part of the week with her, after all.

"Ow. Sumia…hurting…please...get…off…"

"Huh? Robin? Oh! I'm sorry!" The pegasus knight quickly scrambled off the prone tactician. "Gods, Robin! I'm so sorry! Are you alright?"

"Not gonna lie, Sumia, I've been better."

"I'll say. Look at you, you're all wet! And you sound like you're two steps away from dying."

"Sumia, that may very well be the case. I'd hate to ask but this is an emergency. Do you see that tree aheadish?"

"Yes."

"My coat is hanging from one of the branches. Inside the top right hand pocket you'll find a vulnerary. Can I ask you to please bring me this vulnerary? And quickly, too. Time is of the essence."

"O-of course. You can count on me!"

Robin heard Sumia's footsteps as she ran off. Judging by how he currently felt, he needed that vulnerary now more than ever. After the training and having not one, but two people falling on him, Robin didn't think his body could take any more beatings today. He was almost sure that if anything else happened, he would probably fall into a pain-induced coma. He was certainly close to that point now. Everything hurt so much that Robin almost felt like crying.

"R-Robin! H-here I am!" Sumia panted. "I have the vulnerary."

"That was fast. Thanks, Sumia." Robin said before he realized something. "Sumia? Do you think you can help turn me

over?"

"Of course."

Robin grunted as he flopped on his back. "Alright. Almost there. Now, I just have to raise my arms…" Robin grimaced. "I said, raise…arms!"

But no matter how hard he tried, Robin could not get his body to obey his commands. He pretty much burned through all of his reserve strength the first time with Miriel. And he was already running on empty at that point!

"Robin, let me help you." Sumia's voice broke through his (futile) attempts to raise his arms. The pegasus knight knelt down, raised Robin's head with one hand and put the vulnerary to his mouth. "Here. Drink."

Robin gratefully drank the offered vulnerary. The one bright side of the situation was that the pain in his body distracted him from the disgusting taste. It just goes to show that silver linings could be found anywhere. Sometimes, you just had to look very, very well.

"Alright, now to just wait until the healing effects kick in…"

"Here. Why don't you rest your head on my lap? We don't want your head getting dirty."

Robin chuckled. "Sumia, I think I'm way past caring at this point...But I guess it'll be nice not to lie on the hard ground for a change. Thanks."

The tactician closed his eyes and sighed tiredly, coincidentally missing the blush forming on the pegasus knight's face.

"Urgh. What a day…"

"Um, Robin? If you don't mind me asking, what happened to you? You're all wet and look pretty rough."

"Oh, it's nothing. Just decided to take part in Frederick's training course for the insane. And then took a shower with my clothes on."

"Robin, are you crazy? Frederick's Friday training session is only for the strongest Shepherds, and even they struggle! You've only been with us for a little while. Gods, you must be in so much pain right now."

"Yes and yes. But don't worry! I have it all figured out. Everything'll be just fine. Just need the vulnerary to kick in and I'll be sort of back to normal."

"What prompted you to suddenly tackle Frederick's Friday session?"

"It's…a long story. I'll tell you all about it later on. Maybe. Right now, the pain and soreness are starting to get better and I think I can finally stand…"

With a little help from Sumia, Robin finally managed to stand on his own two feet and look around. The first thing he needed was his coat. As it turned out, the tree where he hung it was actually not too far away. The fact that Robin could more or less walk now made it a lot closer. Although his plan was to make a beeline back to his tent and sleep once his coat was safely back on him, Robin decided that he would much rather spend some time under the tree. The weather was still nice and he still needed to dry off a bit.

"Say, Sumia? What had you so invested back there that you didn't see my sad form on the ground?" asked the tactician once they both sat down.

"Oh, I was simply looking at new recipes to try out. I feel that I'm almost ready to make my debut and cook meals for the entire camp!" replied Sumia enthusiastically.

"Hey, that's great!" Robin paused. "Wait a minute. Does that mean I'll no longer be first in line for your pies? Please don't take that away from me! Please? Pretty please?"

"Robin, relax." Sumia giggled. "You can rest assured that you'll still me my only pie taster. I'll still come to you for opinions when I've tried new recipes. Seeing how much my pies mean to you, you don't think I'll suddenly stop giving you some, do you?"

The tactician sighed in relief. "Thanks, Sumia. Your pies mean so much to me. Like, *a lot*. If I was suddenly deprived of the delicious taste of your pies…I don't know what I'd do. Maybe starve and die due to malnutrition of something!"

"Oh, Robin. Dramatic as ever. Actually, I have some good news for you!"

"Goodie! That's my favorite kind of news!"

"I have a pie baking as we speak. It was a recipe that I tried from that book I was reading. Are you willing to give it a taste?"

"Do you even have to ask? I'm always available when it comes to your pies, Sumia! Oh boy, I'm getting excited even thinking about it."

"Great! Why don't you stay here while I'll go fetch it. The pie should be almost done at this point."

"I'll be here. Waiting."

As Robin watched Sumia run off, he suddenly became aware of the fact that he was actually very hungry. It made sense. The last thing he had to eat was Sumia's strawberry pie. Well, *a portion* of it because a certain pie-stealing friend of his managed to get half of it for himself! And after that, it was several hours of super hardcore training that probably burned all the energy Robin had. So he was stuck with an empty stomach. But now, he had yet another one of Sumia's pies to look forward to. Robin actually drooled thinking of it. It would probably be nice and circular. With a tasty…something interior and a crispy crust. And it would smell divine, like cooked bear meat. Hey! Maybe it would be bear meat pie! How great would that be?!

"Er, yer tactifulness?"

Huh. That's funny. Robin didn't imagine his pie talking. And even if he did, that's not the voice he would've associated with it. He would've probably given his pie a nice, seductive voice. And it would invite him to slowly come and admire its scent before getting-

"Um, beg pardon, yer planshipfulness?"

"Buh?" Robin snapped out of his revelry and opened his eyes to see a young boy standing in front of him. "Hey, you're not a bear meat pie!"

"Er, that I ain't. I'm Donnel."

"Yes. Yes you are." Robin said gloomily. "What can I do for you?"

"Um, well…I-I been told that yer our tactician. Responsible fer all our plannin' an' all that?"

"That I am."

"Well, they also told me to see ya as soon as possible so that you can include me in all them battle plans that ya come up with fer the future an' all." Donnel hesitated before continuing. "I'm real sorry I haven't come to ya earlier. When Sir Chrom recruited me, I wanted to come to ya quickitty quick like, but then I found out that ya've been injured pretty bad and needed lotsa rest."

Robin frowned. "Oh, right. You. I'd really not do this now but eh, let's get this over with." He then reached into his coat and pulled out his pen and roster. "I'm not gonna lie to you, Donny, the circumstances or your recruitment and your personal lack of combat experience put you at a huge disadvantage when compared to the rest of us. Frankly, I don't know what the hell Chrom was thinking. Recruiting a random villager kid with no experience whatsoever. I'm actually tempted to annul that recruitment and send you back to your little village."

"Naw, please yer smartliness! I'm beggin' ya. I wanna stay here an' get better an' help fight with the rest of ya!"

"And I want to find merchants who are well stocked and *don't* charge me stupid prices for basic goods and weapons. But we live in an imperfect world and can't always get what we want."

"Please, yer stratigicness, ya ain't firin' me, are ya?"

"No, I'm not firing you. Calm down. And call me 'Robin'. You can dispense with the pleasantries around here. Anyway, I'll give you a chance to prove to me that you can actually be useful to us instead of dead weight. You have one minute. Go."

"Wha? One minute?"

"Too little? Fine. Two minutes. Go."

"Um…er…" Donnel stammered and tried to form a coherent sentence.

"Come on, make a case for yourself. Tell me some of your strengths and why I shouldn't fire you!" Robin said before adding, "By the way, minute fifty seconds."

"Right! I...er, I'm all sorts of good at huntin' and trappin' and the like. If ya need anyone to get some animal meat fer dinner, I'm yer man! I can set up traps an' track animals with the best of 'em."

"Hm, that does have its purposes. Hunting is always a pain, especially when we have to track. Very well, accepted. Minute thirty five."

"Um…I also know my way 'round plants! Can tell the different kind o'plants just by lookin' at 'em. If we're lookin' for some berries in the forest, I can be there to tell ya which ones're safe an' which ones'll give ya stomach pains fer days."

"Useful. Falls into the same category as the above. Very well, noted."

"Yee-haw!"

"Now, combat skills. What have you?"

Donnel's good mood vanished as soon as it came. "Um, 'fraid I got nothin' yer…uh, Robin." When the tactician frowned at started writing things down on the roster, Donnel panicked. "B-but I'm a faster learner! Always have been. When I put my mind to somethin', I can learn it in no time flat."

Robin was unimpressed. "That would help if we were in school or something. But we're at war, Donnel. Mastering a weapon takes time, even if you have some sort of special learning talent. And that time we may not have. Who knows when our next engagement will be? And when that happens, what will you be doing? Staying back and practicing your lance abilities? Based on what I've seen, you've got a long way to go."

"Please, just gimme a chance, Robin! I've been practicin' all diligent like this whole week! Gettin' tips from the others an' tryin' to improve! Miss Maribelle even gave me her special book on law so's I can-"

"What?"

"Huh?"

"You just said Maribelle gave you something?"

"Yessir. Her book boon on law."

"*Maribelle* talked to you."

"Yes."

"Maribelle *talked* to you."

"Uh, yes."

"Maribelle talked to *you*."

"Yes. Is that'a problem?"

Robin just started at Donnel disbelievingly. "I'm sorry, it's just that I have trouble picturing Maribelle talking to people of not her social status. Being a simple village boy, I find her voluntarily talking to you even more unbelievable."

"Is true." Donnel replied. "I even have the big book she gave me right here." He then proceed to take out a fancy looking book from the bag he was carrying.

"So, what? You just carry that thing on you at all times?"

"That's right. Miss Maribelle said that this here was real important to her. So I've been taking real good care of it. Don't want anytin' to happen to it when I ain't lookin'."

"Hm. The *Code of Organizational Regulations?* That's a funny one to begin with."

"Yeah. This book's mighty thick. I've only memorized maybe half of it so-"

"What?"

"Huh?"

"You've memorized half of it? *Memorized.* As in, stored in your memory forever?"

"Well, I wouldn't say forever. Maybe 'till somethin' else comes along. But yeah. Half that book's in 'ol Donny's head."

"Alright. I find that impossible to believe. Maribelle talking to you on her own volition was crazy enough. But you actually memorizing half this giant book in a span of a week? That's just crazy talk!"

"It ain't crazy talk, it's true!" insisted Donnel. "When I wasn't trainin' on the field, I spent every moment I had readin' that there book. I've always been good at memorizin' things and learned stuff pretty quick."

Robin raised an eyebrow. "Alright Mr. Memory, if you did indeed do what you claim, then you wouldn't mind a few questions, would you?"

"Shucks, ask away."

Robin took the book and flipped through a few pages. "Gods, I remember how tedious this was to read. So many words and such small print, too. Urgh, I really have no patience for this." The tactician muttered to himself. "Alright, since we both have better things to do than sit here and recite the many, many fine points in Ylissean law, I'm going to keep this quick and simple. Question one: define 'larceny'."

Donnel cleared his throat. "Larceny's the wrongful taking an' carryin' away of the personal goods of another from his or her possession with intent to convert 'em to the taker's own use."

"Hmph. Lucky guess. Alright, question two: what value should the stolen goods be worth to constitute grand larceny?"

"The value of the goods stolen should be no less'n 100 000 gold pieces."

"Correct. Now, question three: when are taxes collected and how much would I be taxed if I was a famer with…three cows, a goat and five chickens?"

"The newly revised tax laws state that tax collectin' happens of the first of every month barring war, natural disasters'n other catastrophes. And if yer a farmer with three cows, a goat'n five chickens, ya fall under the category of 'small farm owner' and thus obligated to pay 10% of yer total yield and/or any profits that ya'd made."

"Wow. Color me impressed." Robin said as he handed Donnel back his book. "You've actually answered each question correctly and factually. You truly do have a gift for this stuff."

"Thanks, Robin. Does that mean yer not gonna fire me?"

"Perhaps. Your almost complete lack of weapons skills is still quite a bummer. However…" Robin thought for a moment. "You said that you had a knack for learning, right? Do you think that extends to weapon handling?"

"I'd reckon so. I might not be too good right now, but I'd say I've made some progress. I mean, before this week, I couldn't even dream of handln' any weapon! But now, I feels like I got the basics of spears down."

"Hmm, I wonder…"

"Yes, Robin?"

"Donnel, run off and bring Stahl. You know Stahl? The knight in green armor. I want him here. Pronto!"

"Right! Be back in a jiffy!"

And Donnel ran off to find Stahl. Meanwhile, Robin was quickly formulating a new way of using Stahl's averageness to his advantage. If he was right, this would bring Donnel up to an acceptable standard of fighting in no time!

"Here we are! Back all quick like!"

Before Robin could open his mouth, Stahl let out a pained groan and collapsed on the ground.

"Gods, Stahl. What the hell happened to you?"

"Miriel…pushing…training…tired…" panted the knight.

"Heh. Consider yourself lucky. At least you weren't in Frederick's Fanatical Friday Fitness Funstravaganza."

Stahl let out a tired laugh. "Yeah…right…too…tough…have to be…crazy…to…do…that…to…yourself."

"Yes. I hear that a lot. Anyway, I have brought you here because I have a very important assignment for you." Robin looked from one to the other. "Both of you."

"I'm ready to take anythin' ya throw at me to prove myself!" Donnel exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Ready…as…ever…" Stahl managed to breathe out.

"Excellent! Your assignment is this: Donnel, I'm assigning you to Stahl. He's going to be your mentor. He'll help you learn the ropes around here so you'll get the hang of war related things. Stahl here is very knowledgeable about that stuff." Robin then turned to the still lying knight. "Stahl, it's your job to teach Donny about how we work and fight. Let him train with you and try to improve his fighting skills as well as teach him how to handle some weapons. We clear?"

"Yessir!"

"Crystal."

"Good. Now, Donny? Why don't you help Stahl up and go and see what he'll be doing next. If you can, I strongly encourage you to join in his training sessions. You can only improve from there!"

"Alright. Thanks again, Robin. I'll be sure to train real hard for ya so I can prove that I can be a real Shepherd and protect everyone! Come on, Stahl. Up ya get. Lemme help ya get to where ya need to be."

"Thanks, Donnel. And don't worry, Robin. I'll be the best mentor ever. You can count on me!"

"That's what I like to hear! Make me proud you two!"

"So, where we headed, Stahl?"

"Back to the training grounds. Miriel said that I can gave a little break before my 100 laps around camp…"

"Golly, that sounds mighty tough."

"It…is…"

Once the two were out of sight, Robin made a few notes on his roster. He would need to consult Miriel and see if she could note down Donnel's progress. If what Donnel said was true and if his learning skills could be applied to fighting, then Stahl was the perfect partner to do so. Being partnered up with the knight who had a reputation for being completely average, Donnel's skills would be forced to improve faster to catch up. With Miriel pushing Stahl to his limits, that would hopefully also drag Donnel up too. It was the perfect plan! Sometimes, Robin surprised even himself with the things he came up with.

Robin looked up when a heavenly smell reached his nostrils and saw Sumia running toward him.

"Robin! I'm back!"

"Yes you are! And I see you bring gifts!"

"Indeed I do!" Sumia said cheerily as she sat down and started cutting Robin a piece of her new pie. "Now, bear with me, Robin. This is a new recipe that I've found and may not be the most traditional pie out there."

"You could make the most non-traditional pie out there and I'm sure it'll still taste great."

"Aw, thank you! Always so full of compliments." Sumia finished cutting and gave Robin a slice. "Now, this is liver-and-eel pie. I want your honest opinion, Robin. Please don't worry about hurting my feelings. I'm a big girl. I can take it."

"Liver-and-eel, huh?" That certainly gave Robin pause for thought. It wasn't the most natural set of ingredients in the world. Then again, it smelled good. And Sumia made it, so that was already a seal of quality. And Robin was hungry. That made everything taste better.

"Alright." Robin took a piece and prepared himself just in case. "Here we go."

Sumia watched as he took a tentative (yet big) bite and chewed. "…Well? How did it turn out?"

"It's…good. Very, very good. Delicious, actually!" Robin then proceeded to devour the entire piece.

Sumia let out a relieved sigh. "Oh, I'm so glad. When I saw the recipe, I just knew that I had to try it out. But I was worried that it would turn out bad because it was quite out there."

"Mmm, mmm. Don't worry. It turned out great! Delicious! Amazing! Actually, I think this may be my most favorite pie yet."

"It's really that good?"

"I don't lie about things, Sumia. Especially pies. Can I have another piece?"

"Of course. Here."

So, despite the dismal start to the day, it just went to show that things could still pick up no matter how bad they seemed. Robin may have done some training that was way out of his league, but he managed to improve his overall performance in the end. That was his objective and he successfully achieved it. On top of that, here he was enjoying some delicious pie with Sumia. That was very, very important and made everything better. Robin briefly wondered why there was a warm feeling developing in his chest before he dismissed it as being the euphoria of a new Sumia pie. That always made him feel very emotional (and full).

Chapter 14: Gaius

I had an outline for this chapter in my head for a while, it just took me longer than expected to put it into words. Not sure about the final product, may rewrite in future.

A big thank you to everyone who favorited, followed and reviewed. It's much appreciated.

Camping. The great outdoors. Camping and the great outdoors. They say that there's nothing like it. Sleeping on the ground underneath the stars, waking to the sunrise every morning, foraging for your next meal in the bush, braving the elements and all that. It was truly a one-of-a-kind experience…

…And Robin hated every second of it. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Robin did enjoy it up to a point. But after that point, camping started getting tedious and unbearable. And Robin drew that point around a week. No, *exactly* a week. Camping was all fun and good for seven days. It was new, fun, and novel. But after seven days, the novelty wore off. Setting up camp, getting the tents up and then disassembling them, the rough ground and the lack of modern comforts found in the city became a pain in the ass. Braving the weather when it became poor also didn't help. Be it heat, rain, sleet, snow or general coldness, a tent did not really provide the same level of protection as a solid house. Robin found that out the hard way when, after a week of good weather, the Shepherds suddenly got caught in a thunderstorm when they were in the process of setting up their camp. Needless to say, sleeping while wet was…less than ideal. And the bugs were a fun touch.

So, after their trekking through the wilderness, Robin was only too glad to be back in the city. And it wasn't just any city, either. It was the capital city of Ylisstol, the crown jewel of Ylisse. At least that's what Robin heard some people call it. And he had to agree. The big, bustling city has quite the sight to behold. Then again, after spending weeks camping out in the wilderness, any city would probably be seen as a bastion of comfort. Nevertheless, being the capital, Ylisstol was a cut above the other towns and cities located around the country. Ylisstol was filled with people, shops, cafes, restaurants, and the main castle. The main castle where the government and Exalt resided and from where they governed the entire country. The main castle that had big, comfy rooms with their big, comfy beds, the best chefs on hand to prepare the tastiest meals, smiths that were ready to forge weapons for…okay, actually their prices were even higher than smiths in the more remote parts of the country, but hey, the quality had to be better! (Not that Robin would ever know. Even with the royal discount, the prices the smiths demanded for their services had more zeroes at the end than what Robin was prepared to spend. So he was confined to admiring from the windows. At least that was free).

BUT! The main reason Robin was glad to be back in the capital wasn't all the comforts (although they were a part of it, *especially* the comfy beds) or the fact that he had a solid roof over his head that protected him from the elements. It wasn't even the fact that he now had a consistent supply of good food instead of the gamble that was the rotating camp cooking schedule which ranged from delicious to passably edible (Robin banned Sully from cooking duty after all the horror stories. Maybe Chrom, too…and Vaike for good measure). No. The main reason Robin was ecstatic to be back in Ylisstol was because he knew he had something very special waiting for him when he got back. The thing that he was supposed to see after their little diplomatic mission to Regna Ferox. The thing that he looked forward to during this whole adventure and dreamed about when he wasn't dreaming about wyverns, Risen, pies or other terrifying creatures and/or baked goods.

His desk. His *new* desk. His new, improved and superior desk that was declared 'desk of the year' by *Desk Magazine Monthly.* And with a name like Desk Magazine Monthly, those guys totally knew their quality desks form their shoddy, regularly plain ones! It was rated five stars in all the important categories of comfort, space, sturdiness and build. It was basically the dream desk all office workers dreamed of. And Robin was the proud owner of one! Well, he was technically a proud owner of one weeks and weeks ago, but then *someone* just had to get kidnapped and *someone else* had to continue being a dick and necessitate an intervention. So, Robin did have his desk, he just didn't have a chance to see it until now. But that would change! As soon as they got back, Robin would rush to his office and admire his new desk in all its glory. Nothing would stop him! NOTHING!

And something really did want to stop him from seeing his new desk, if the day's events were any indication. It was just surprise after surprise. The first one being Marth showing up when Robin was talking to Chrom in the castle courtyard. That dude seemed to show up everywhere, say something cryptic, and leave. Except he didn't this time. No, this time he said his bit, and then took out an assassin with precision and skill that was truly remarkable. Then there was another assassin in the bushes (quickly dispatched by Chrom). Then Marth turned out to be a lady! Robin was probably more surprised by this development than he had any right to be. "Marth" was already quite effeminate to begin with. Him being a woman should not have been that impressive a surprise (what *was* impressive was how she managed to hide her long, flowing hair! Seriously, there was suddenly so much, where and how could she possibly hide it?)

Of course, Robin didn't have time to ponder the answers to his questions as yet another surprise made itself known: Plegians were attacking the castle. Apparently their goal was to assassinate the Exalt. Robin was briefly filled with rage and indignation at how the Plegians could attempt such an audacious assault in the heart of the city. Then he remembered that Ylisse's army was pretty much non-existent. Actually, the Shepherds were all the army that the country had. So, the Plegians being here suddenly made a lot of sense. Not having any guards or soldiers to go through, the Plegians could've pretty much just waltzed into the castle. They probably didn't even hide their weapons! They again, why would they? There was absolutely no need for subtlety as there were no guards to provide checks or security! Their lack of a proper armed forces was simply unacceptable. They were at war and needed people to fight! The Shepherds were capable, sure, but they couldn't be everywhere at once. Nor could they take an entire country's military all by themselves. Regna Ferox was kind enough to help, but their forces were still quite a while away. If they all survived this thing, Robin made a mental note to talk to Emmeryn and convince her of the need for an army, lofty ideals of peace be damned.

In the end, the Shepherds prevailed and repelled the assault. After some fighting in the courtyard, castle, various rooms in said castle, castle hallways and other such places, all the Plegians were eventually dead and the whole area secure. Emmeryn was safe and *not* dead, the Shepherds all survived and no one was grievously hurt. All in a day's work. While Chrom was talking to his elder sister, Robin personally checked the rooms where combat took place to ensure that the Plegians didn't leave any traps or other nasty surprises. The last room that needed checking was his office. Robin was confident that nothing in there was seriously damaged. After all, most of the fighting took place near the main hall and Emmeryn's room. Robin was certain that his office was out of the way enough to avoid the conflict. Thus, he opened the doors and entered his office with confidence.

The sight that beheld him was not a pretty one. Apparently, his office was not far enough to avoid the fighting. And it seemed that the fighting that took place here was particularly intense. There were Plegian corpses littered here and there, shelves were broken, books and papers were scattered everywhere. Robin's eyes travelled to the far end of the room. Right then and there, he saw the most depressing, soul crushing thing he could possibly see. Robin stood there in silence, mouth agape and not wanting to believe what he was seeing. When his mind finally (and reluctantly) acknowledged what he saw was real, Robin let out the most agonized, despair filled scream imaginable. A scream that was filled with unimaginable grief, anger, frustration and a multitude of other, similar emotions that Robin felt but could not express. And after that, he did what any man does when he finds himself at the lowest point in his life…

"Barkeep! Another drink, if you please."

…That is, of course, going to the nearest bar and drowning all his troubles away with copious amounts of alcohol. Granted, he didn't have to go very far and the Royal Bar was a cut above the average bar found in the city. Still, Robin wasn't to discriminating. Alcohol as alcohol no matter where you got it from and made everything better. All the main characters in those books he and Sumia read went to drink when they were down on their luck. Of course, it was at the bar that they would meet various wacky characters that would join them on their grand adventure or get them to see the light. But that wasn't going to happen and not why Robin was here. He was here to drown the pain that he was feeling with alcohol. Lots and lots of alcohol. Alcohol until the point that he wouldn't feel pain…or passed out. Robin wasn't too picky.

"Here you go, Mac."

"Thanks." Robin mumbled and then took a swig from his mug.

"Gods above, Mac. You don't look too good."

"What was your first clue? My disheveled appearance or the fact that I'm sitting here and continuously ordering drinks?"

"Wanna talk about it?"

"No. What I want to do is forget about it and drink in peace."

"C'mon, it'll help you feel better." The barkeep poured a few drinks, put them on the counter and looked at Robin expectantly. "Talking with someone helps. I've seen it countless times. You'll feel better."

"No. I'll feel better when I've drunk myself to a drunken stupor! Talking interferes with this plan."

"I sense a lot of pain. Recent, too. Loss, perhaps?"

"What are you, some kind of psychologist now?"

"Hm. Great loss, judging by the hostility. Someone close to you. Someone you care about a great deal."

Robin sighed irritably. "You're not going to leave me alone until I talk, are you?"

The barkeep simply smiled. "I've seen many a man in your position. Eventually, you want to help as many of them as you can. Sometimes, you also have to insist. And now, I insist."

Robin sighed again. "Fine. As long as you keep the drinks coming, I guess I'll humor you." He then took another swig from his mug before talking. "You're right. I have experienced loss today. Tremendous loss. A loss so devastating that I'm here trying to drink it away. And I don't even drink!"

"Aye. It seems that it has affected you deeply."

"That it has." Robin then finished his drink. "More."

After being handed another mug, Robin continued. "I first heard about her not too long after I arrived in the city. Nothing too substantial, just whispers and occasional mentions here and there. I first laid my eyes on here when I was walking by a magazine stand."

Robin took a sip from his mug and had a faraway look in his eyes. "Right then and there, I knew it was love at first sight. She was beautiful. Strong. Exotic. She was perfect. I immediately bought the issue to read more about this heavenly beauty. I simply had to know everything about her! Even the most minutest details, down to every last measurement."

"Th-they print measurements these days?!"

"And that's when my little infatuation started," continued Robin, completely ignoring the barkeep. "I would read the magazine in my spare time. I would dream of her and of our first meeting. How she would look in real life. How she would feel. But I knew it was not to be. I was in Ylisse and she…she was somewhere far away. Besides, bringing her all the way over here would take time and money. Shipping costs and all that."

"Shipping costs?"

"Yes. Shipping costs. That, and import taxes and all the blasted red tape! I tells you, the Ylissean tax code is stupidly archaic and complicated. Complicated I say! Why, if I weren't busy with all the war and whatnot, I've got half a mind to sit down and streamline that whole damn thing until it makes sense. Sense! Preferably of the common variety!" Robin exclaimed and then downed the contents of his mug in one go.

"Uh…right." The barkeep handed another mug to Robin. "So, back to your lovely lass. What changed?"

"Hm? Oh, right. Well, at the time, I couldn't be with my beloved because reasons and prior engagements. But one day, everything changed. My prior engagements…disengaged and I found myself with enough money to finally bring my beloved here! That day was magical." Robin wiped a few tears from his eyes, sipped his drink and continued. "I knew that it would be a while until I saw her for real. But I could wait. I conveniently had to go away on business that day and wouldn't be back for exactly a while. It was as if the stars themselves were alighting to make our meeting possible."

"Sounds like things were finally coming together for you two."

"Oh, they were. They were! I was away for…some amount of time. And in that amount of time, I knew that she would finally find her way here. I even paid extra for shipping and handling to make extra sure that nothing will happen to her! That stuff isn't cheap, but I was prepared to pay, I was. That's how much I wanted to see her!"

"Aye. You certainly seem devoted. Where did it all go wrong?"

After downing his drink and reaching for another one, Robin spoke. "If I had to guess, it was probably when we got back that things started to go bad. I mean, when I got back, I was going to rush off and see her right away. But as soon as I got back, duty called and I was sent off to deal with some border thing on the border. That's another few weeks away from her, right there."

"'Tis tough when you have to balance your duties with your beloved."

"Yes, yes it is. But I am a patient man. I fulfilled my duties with only minimal complaints. Sorted the whole border incident out, made sure my friends got out alive, sustained multiple injuries in the line of duty, etc etc. And do you know why? I'll tell you why. I did it because I knew I had something to look forward to when I got back. And the delay made the moment of our first meeting even more special. That's what I told myself."

"A positive attitude to have given the circumstances."

"It's the only attitude that I could adopt, given the circumstances. Today was supposed to be the happiest day of my life to date. Finally coming back, relaxing and seeing the love of my life for the first time. But alas, it was not meant to be." Robin took another big swig.

"I know it's painful, lad," the barkeep said sympathetically. "But trust me, you'll feel better after you let it all out. Go on. Tell me what happened."

"It was those damned Plegians!" Robin suddenly slammed his mug down on the table. "Of all the days they could've chosen to attack us, why did they have to choose today?! Today! As in, the day I finally get back after a long journey to see my beloved!"

The barkeep grimaced but otherwise said nothing. He could already see where this was headed.

"I fought them off as hard as I could, of course. I didn't even think about my significant other. Do you know why? Because I naively assumed that she was far away enough to avoid all the fighting. What a fool I was! A FOOL!"

"How did you find out?"

"In the worst possible way. It was after battle. I was inspecting the rooms for traps. I walked up to my office, expecting it to be in one piece. I opened the door and…"

"Go on, lad."

"It was an absolute mess. At least a dozen bodies. Books and papers everywhere. Furniture turned over or broken. Whoever was in here sure fought hard. But none of that mattered when I looked at the far end. That's when I saw…her. She…she…"

"Easy there, lad. Take your time."

To steel himself, Robin drank quickly and downed his entire mug along with half of another one. "There she was. At the far end. It…it was horrible. She had so many cuts and scars from all the weapons. There were even a few swords and an axe stuck in her. Were those the only problems I would still love her. Scars and holes are just minor details! But it was worse. So much worse…"

The barkeep remained silent, waiting for Robin to continue.

"She was…she was...DISMEMBERED!"

"Dismembered?!" exclaimed the barkeep.

"Dismembered!" wailed Robin. "Her legs were all broken, her sides were cut or missing and she herself was split down right down the middle! Why do bad things happen to good people? Why, I ask you, WHY?!" And with that, Robin burst into tears.

"Those Plegian beasts!" spat the barkeep. "Killing innocents in such a grisly manner! Barbarians, the lot of them!" After his outburst, the barkeep quickly collected himself and patted Robin sympathetically on the shoulder. "No one should have to see what you have seen today. Especially when it concerns their loved one. I know it may not mean anything to you, but I'm truly sorry for your loss."

Robin just continued sobbing.

"Gods above, after what you've just told me, I see why you're here. Maybe you do need a few more drinks to forget the horror." The barkeep then refilled Robin's mugs. "Does talking about it at least make you feel better?"

The tactician grieved for a few moments before calming himself. "No. If anything, I feel worse because I now had to relive that very painful moment in my life. What will make me feel better is more alcohol. And none of this beer crap. I've drunk how many mugs now? All I feel is a slight dizziness. Give me the good stuff! Like…" Robin looked at the menu. "What's this 'South Ylissean Iced Tea' thing?"

"Ah, that one's a classic. A mix of about five different types of alcohol and-"

"Good. Gimme."

"You sure, Mac? Wouldn't it be better for you to drink more of something stronger?"

"You said this thing has a bunch of different alcohols in it. A bunch is a bigger number than one. So gimme."

"Alright. One South Ylissean Iced Tea coming right up."

Robin watched impassively as the barkeep made his drink. When the barkeep handed it over, Robin took a big gulp. "Hm. This thing's pretty good."

"Aye." The barkeep remained silent before saying something else. "As horrible as it is, it may be better that you didn't know your beloved. I've seen many a man come here after having lost their mothers, or sisters or wives. They were in bad shape, they were. The pain only multiplies the longer you've known your significant other. Harsh as it may seem, you still have a chance to meet someone, get to know them and establish a bond."

"What's the point?" Robin asked morosely. "I can order another desk, sure. But it'll all be useless in the end. I'll probably lose it to a spontaneous fire or something…"

"…A desk?"

"A very special desk. Tough, sturdy and made with the finest wood in all of…some faraway place that I can't remember the name of. She was so special. I could do all my work and still have enough space left over for piles and stuff."

"…Alright there, Mac. I think you've had quite enough to drink. You're now starting to talk crazy."

"Nah. I'm telling it straight! And don't you go off telling me how much I can or can't drink. Only I can tell myself how much I can or cannot drink. And I demand another one of these!" Robin pointed to his empty glass. "They're really good."

The barkeep look at Robin dubiously before shrugging. "You're the boss. Another South Ylissean Iced Tea, coming right up."

"That's right it is!" declared the tactician. He was starting to feel better. He didn't know if it was all those beers suddenly kicking in or if the Ylissean Iced Tea was that effective. Although he didn't really care. Feeling good took priority.

"That was some story, there."

Robin turned to see an orange haired man sit next to him. He looked a bit rough, like he'd seen recent combat. Dressed quite shadily, too. In any other circumstances, Robin's mind would be filled with ringing alarm bells. However, Robin's more sensible side was being dulled by alcohol. That left him feeling open and friendly.

"Is all true. The saddest day of my life, this is. Who're you?"

"The name's Gaius. Pleasure to meet you."

"Robin. Likewise." The two men shook hands. "So, Gaius. What brings a man like you to a fine drinking establishment such as this?"

"Just my work."

"Right. So, what's your-"

"Here's your Iced Tea," the barkeep handed Robin his drink and turned to Gaius. "Anything for you?"

Before Gaius could answer, Robin butted in. "Yes. I'm feeling generous. Get my friend here an Iced Tea. Put it on my tab."

"Right away."

"Wow, Robin. You're pretty generous for a guy I've just met five seconds ago. Thanks!" Gaius said appreciatively.

"What can I say? I'm a giver given the right circumstances. And that's now! Order whatever you like and as much of it as you want! It's all on me!" exclaimed Robin as he took a shot from his glass.

"Heh, when you put it like that, don't mind if I do!"

-Some drinks later-

"…and that's how I blew my one and only chance to try out that super special anniversary candy."

"Wow. That's quite the depressing story you told me there, Gaius. You sure you can't get another chance at it?"

"No can do. That was special candy made to commemorate the 100 year anniversary of Billy Bonker's Chocolate

Emporium. They only released a dozen batches and gave them away via lottery. I was lucky enough to get my hands on one and get a tour of the factory. But in my youthful dumbness I…" Gaius sighed and drank. "Let's just say that I understand your loss. How you feel about your desk is exactly how I felt when I lost my anniversary candy. Damn, it still hurts to this day."

"THANK YOU!" exclaimed Robin. "It's so nice to have someone who understands me, and I mean *understands* understands. I may be a tactician, but I still have feelings for…things and stuff. Granted, my feelings may be for my recently departed desk, but they are still feelings, damn it!"

Gaius chuckled lightly. "No problem. It's always nice to share stories, especially with someone who so generously buys his friends drinks."

"Th-that's me, Mr. Generosity." Robin finished his drink and ordered another one. "G-gee, Gaius. Y-you seem to be a pretty swell guy. What brings you here?"

"Just my work." Gaius replied before downing his entire glass. "Barkeep! More."

"Yeah. I kinda remember you telling me that." Robin tried to remember. "What'd you do again?"

"I'm an acquirer. I acquire things for people in exchange for money. I also sometimes acquire things for myself, usually without permission from the person I'm acquiring from."

"Sooo, you're a thief?"

"I prefer 'professional taker', thank you very much."

Robin stared at Gaius before laughing. "That's a good one! Yo-you can't be a thief!"

"Wha-? I am too!" Gaius sounded genuinely offended.

"Naw! Thieves are shady and smelly and look funny. They also take my stuff on the field! But you? You're pretty cool. Too cool to be a thief for sure." Robin took a drink. "B-bsides. If you were a thief, you'd be in jail right now! N-not in the Royal Bar!"

"Yeah? Well I'm a Shepherd now! I belong here. So ha!"

If anything, that just made Robin laugh even more.

"See, now I know you're full of it! You can't possibly be a Shepherd!"

"Man, do you have a problem with me or something? First you say I ain't no thief. Now I ain't even a Shepherd! What's with the no faith in your good friend Gaius?"

"There are a few reasons why don't believe you." Robin held out his hand. "One, you need to prove yourself and earn a Shepherdship with us. Two, I'm the dude new people need to talk to. A-assessmentabilities and stuff. Three, we need people that…something…respectable…stuff…no thieves! Thieves are bad. Five, Chrom wouldn't just hire some old shumck off the streets after I gave him my 'why you shouldn't hire any old schumck off the street' lecture. And…uh," Robin blinked and stared at his hand. "There! Seven reasons why you can't possibly be a Shepherd."

"Oh yeah? What if I told you that Chrom personally hired me?"

"Pfft, yeah right. If you're a Shepherd than I'm the King of Plegia. We already went over the ten reasons why you ain't no Shepherd. Chrom wouldn't just ignore everything I lectured him about! What else you got?"

"You're not making this any easier for me, man. Why don't we ask Chrom? I'm sure he'll back me up on this."

"Fine. Let's to that. And when you turn out to be wrong I'm gonna enjoy laughing in your face!" Robin declared and made to get up. Unfortunately for him, he leaned forward too much and ended up falling on his face.

"You okay, there?"

"I-it's a good thing I'm drunk. Otherwise, that would've probably hurt."

"Robin?"

The tactician heard a familiar voice. He then got up unsteadily and saw a familiar face.

"Hey Chrom! What a coinkidink! We were just talking about you!"

"Huh?" The man in question looked past Robin. "Oh, I see you've already met Gaius."

"O-oh, you already know each other? That's great!"

"Yes, but that's a story for another day. Robin, I need to talk to you about-" Chrom suddenly paused and stared at his friend. "Robin, have you been drinking all this time? Are you drunk?"

"What? Noooo!"

"Yes you are."

Robin remained silent before smiling. "Okay, maybe a little."

Chrom sighed. "Robin, you don't strike me as the type to go off on a drinking spree. What drove you to do this?"

"Oh, that's a long, melodramatic story ending in tragedy. Save it for another day. What's important now is that you're here and can now help us settle something. Our good friend Gaius…" Robin pointed behind him. "He's got it in his head that he's a Shepherd. I know, it's crazy! What's better is that he says that you personally hired him. Now, I'm here thinking that that's crazy talk! You clearly wouldn't do something like that after I highlighted all of the dangers of doings something like that. But Gaius strongly insists you did do something like that and now here we are. So I just need you to clear up this little thing and we can go back to stuff. And while you do, let me just finish this here drink."

While Robin was busy downing his drink, Chrom cleared his throat. "Um, yes. About that. Robin, I meant to tell you after we defeated the assassins. I did personally hire Gaius. He's a Shepherd now."

It was a very unfortunate time to be drinking as the tactician coughed and choked on his drink upon hearing the unbelievable news. Behind him, Gaius laughed.

"Damn, that's one heck of a way to react to bad news. Look at all the bubbles you made coughing! Hey, that kind of works. I, Gaius, now dub thee, 'Bubbles'. Ain't that grand?"

The newly dubbed Bubbles ignored Gaius and tried to resume breathing. Once that happened, he glared at his friend.

"Chrom, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt because I think the alcohol is messing with my hearing. Now, I *know* you didn't just say that you personally hired our orange haired friend here, right?"

"I'm afraid you heard right, Robin. I hired Gaius."

It took Robin a few minutes to properly process this information. When he did, Robin felt a multitude of different emotions. Anger was prominent among them and the urge to scream and hit Chrom was strong. However, Robin still had enough self-control to restrain himself and instead took the most logical course of action: he reached for the nearest drink and downed it in one go before addressing the stunned lord.

"Chrom, you're my best friend and commander, so I am obliged to support you in all your endeavors. *However,* that doesn't mean that I can't have an open and honest discussion with you. Starting right now. ARE YOU CRAZY?! Hiring a thief?! Do you know that thieves are one step away from being assassins? *Assassins!* As in those people who are sent specifically to kill other people on the quiet. People like you!"

"Robin, calm down. I know that this is a little unorthodox, but Gaius seems like a good person and-"

"Oh yeah! I'm sure all assassins are pleasant people before they get close enough to stick the knife in your heart. Or back. Or head. Wherever. The point is, you shouldn't hire random people off the street. Especially thieves and potential assassins. Once that door's opened, what's next? You're going to hire dark mages? Psychopaths? Psychopath dark mages? Come on, Chrom. Didn't you pay attention at my special lecture on this topic?"

"Gods, the lecture. That was one hour of my life that I'll never get back…" mumbled Chrom.

"Clearly, not long enough!" exclaimed Robin, starling his friend. "Next time, I'll have to double it to get the point across."

"Wh-what? No no, that won't be necessary!" Chrom said quickly. "Besides, how can you say such things, Robin? After your circumstances? And Donnel?"

"Two strokes of luck." Robin replied. "Especially with me. I mean, Donnel's a kid's who's lived in a village all his life, but me? Some guy who has no memory lying in a field wearing an awesome robe? Even I wouldn't believe me if I heard this

story!"

"Well, yes. But look how you turned out! Shouldn't we assume the best and give Gaius a chance?"

"Yeah," Gaius chimed in. "I'm a pretty neat guy, I mean I-"

"Hey!" interrupted Robin. "This doesn't concern you."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I guess I was thrown off by the mention of my name." Gaius said sarcastically before turning away. "Barkeep! Gimme more of this drink. And add some extra cream on in, would you?"

Robin turned back to Chrom. "Where'd you find this guy, anyway?"

"Well, funny story. We were on the battlefield when he came up to me. I noticed that he looked quite with his former colleagues so I-"

"Wait a minute. Did I hear that right? You found him amongst the Plegian assassins sent to kill Emmeryn? You hired one of the men who were sent *to kill your older sister*?"

"Well, I'll admit that it sounds crazy when you put it like that. But hey! He didn't want to be there and gladly changed sides for us! Isn't that a good thing?"

Robin stared at Chrom incredulously. Suddenly, those mixed feelings of a few minutes ago (anger still being chief among them) seemed to rush back with double their intensity. There was only one obvious solution: more alcohol.

After finishing two more drinks, Robin found himself feeling much better (having trouble standing up and the world spinning were just pleasant side effects).

"C-Chrom, I may be feeling somewhat drunker with each passing second…but I still see that hiring Gaius was pretty dumb. Before I continue yelling at you, I must know: was his price at least reasonable?"

"Oh, very much so," replied Chrom. "He was kind enough to change sides for a bag of Lissa's sweets. You can't get any more reasonable than that, can you?"

"Chrom, I…" Robin sighed. "I have no time for this. I came here to have a good time and forget my troubles. Yelling at you gets in the way of that. Remind me of this in the morning."

"Yeah, lighten up there, Bubbles!" Gaius exclaimed and threw an arm around Robin. "This is the Royal Bar! A place of alcohol of high quality and merriment! So drink the former and let that lead you to the latter!" He then turned to Chrom. "Blue, you wanna get out of here? You're really harshing on Bubbles' mellow here."

"Wha-? But he's my tactician! I'm here to ask about-" Chrom protested before being cut off.

"Yeah. Gaius is right. I-I need to be having the fun and whatever. Come see me in the morning, Chrom." Robin then turned to Gaius. "I still don't trust you. But I'll be willing to overlook it this one night because I need you to be 'drinking buddy Gaius' and not 'probable assassin Gaius'. Just…promise to not kill me tonight. Deal?"

"Done. Now come on, Bubbles. I still need my good friend who's also picking up the tab. Naga knows there's no way I can possibly do so myself!"

"I hope you're not just sticking with me because I'm footing the tab." Robin chuckled as he picked up a drink.

"What? No!" exclaimed Gaius. "How could you even think that after we shared our personal stories of tragedy and loss? Bubbles, the bond we've established today is something real special. The free drinking just adds to its specialness."

"Aw, your words touch my heart. To specialness!"

"Cheers!"

Chrom just stared at how Robin and Gaius very happily talked and drank. It was as if the tactician, so clearly disapproving of the thief and his presence amongst the Shepherds, completely forgot his reservations and was now drinking as if he and Gaius were long lost friends. It was nice, in a way. At least Robin would get to know their newest member better and hopefully stop being so suspicious. Then again, they were consuming more alcohol as time went on and that never lead to anything good. Besides, Chrom needed his tactician and newest Shepherd sober and rational for what was to come. Maybe an intervention was in order.

"Guys, not to sound like a killjoy or anything, but maybe you should lighten up on the drinks? We have a long journey ahead of us tomorrow and it would be wise to have a clear head for it."

Robin and Gaius stopped talking and looked at Chrom as if he just said something insane.

"The hell you talking about?"

"Seriously. You know, you need to lighten up, Blue. Not everything has to be business all the time. In fact, here." Gaius passed in a mug of ale. "The first step in your loosening up process. We'll start you off with ale and gradually move up to the stronger stuff."

"Gaius, I thank you for your concern, but I don't need-"

"Pfft, starting off with the weaker stuff." Robin scoffed. "Come on, Chrom. Hit the good stuff hard and fast! I did it and I'm fi-*hic* fi-*hic* I'm super!"

"Robin, I don't think you of all people should be advocating drinking hard-"

"Come on, Blue, live a little!" urged Gaius. "All work and no play make the Prince of Ylisse a dull boy. Celebrate with the masses today. You won't regret it…"

"Since when do you two-"

"Dammit Chrom, just join us here or go and be boring somewhere else!" cried Robin. "Otherwise, your boringness will start to infec-*hic* infect-*hic* spread!"

Chrom knew he should be above this. Chrom knew they were baiting him. Chrom also knew they were drunk. For all intents and purposes, Chrom should've just ignored whatever was said to him and carried on being the voice of reason. But some of the insults resonated with him and he felt the need to prove them wrong. He may have been the Prince of Ylisse, but he knew how to have fun and he was *certainly* not boring! And damn it he would prove it today!

"Fine. I'll join you guys for a few drinks. Barkeep! Give me the strongest thing on the menu."

-Many drinks later-

"…naked posters of Chrom in every tent!"

"Really? That's hilarious!"

"Did you *really* have to tell that story?"

Two men laughed drunkenly while a third sat and buried his face in his hands.

"Those posters still around?"

"Probly. He tried to get 'em all but I think some got out. Bet they're worth a lot on the black market."

"I bet all the buyers're rich noble ladies. Hey, do you think some of the ladies here bought some?!"

"That…would…be…amazing!"

More laughing from the two men. Groaning and drinking from the third.

"Hey! There you are!"

The three men in the room turned to the new voice.

"I didn't know we were down here celebrating. How come I didn't get an invite?"

"Yeah, same thing with me. How can you have a drinking party without The Vaike? That's almost insulting!"

"Sully! And The Vaike!" Robin greeted happily. "Come join us! We've got *hic* plenty to 'round!"

"Hell yeah! Time to really let loose!"

"Class is in session and Teach just got tenure!"

-Many more drinks later-

Time has lost all meaning. Everything blurred into one giant, happy, drunken event. Robin couldn't remember when it turned from mourning his desk to celebrating…something. In fact, he lost track of events after they all started that drinking contest to see who could drink the most shots without throwing up. He was pretty sure that it wasn't him because he vaguely remembered feeling things coming up his throat. It was then a furry of events that included laughter, mocking, cheering, drinking and other related activities. What he *was* sure of was that he certainly felt great and did not feel an ounce of sadness after losing his desk. And in the end, that was worth all of the bruises, vomiting and other side effects resulting from this day. It's a good thing that drinking copious amounts of alcohol has no negative side effects whatsoever! Otherwise, Robin would be slightly worried.

Chapter 15: Panne

Ah, the morning after. We've all been there. Not the most ideal conditions to conduct interviews.

Sleep. It was possibly the best thing one could ever do, ever. Sleeping was the one time when you could just turn off, tune out, not think, and just relax. Swim in the sea of your unconsciousness with no worries, no thoughts and no nothing. Generally there is only darkness, but dreams occasionally popped up. Pleasant dreams were quite nice when they happened. Nightmares were not. But it was still nice, after a difficult day, to lie down, close your eyes and let your mind shut down into a blissful sleep.

That was Robin's favorite activity. Truth be told, he probably loved sleeping more that he loved strategy, tactics, and even Sumia's pies. That's right! *More than even Sumia's pies.* Considering his love for those pies, saying that he loved something more was a pretty serious statement.

Robin didn't know why he enjoyed sleeping so much. Perhaps it was because sleeping was the thing that Robin got to do only sometimes and only for a few hours at a time. Robin's job demanded that he spend a good part of his day coming up with plans and strategies to ensure that his friends fight, win, and survive. Of course, he also had other responsibilities aside from all the strategicing and tacticing. He had to train, eat, try new things, meet new people, do the social thing with people he already met, inventory, read various books, discuss the various books he read with Sumia, balance the budget, inventory, read/go over/evaluate reports, haggle merchants for reasonable prices, inventory, go over the roster, assign Shepherds to maximize efficiency, optimize Stahl for maximum averageness, inventory, performance evaluation, and other stuff. Just to name a few of his responsibilities. So, most of his daytime was already taken up by mostly non tactical activities. That left only the night for all the planning and strategizing. That, combined with Robin's obsessive need to be super ultra-prepared for any and every possibility as well as his self-imposed obligation to have at least five different types of plans ensured that Robin didn't really sleep much. He got little burst naps at best before he pushed himself to complete his plans, backup plans, contingency plans, emergency plans and desperate/last-minute-plans-that-should-only-be-executed-in-only-the-most-desperate-circumstances. Robin could work like that for a few days before his body rebelled and he went to bed (read: collapsed) at a more or less reasonable hour and slept through the night and halfway through the next day. Those nights were probably the most relaxing times in the entire day (aside from the times he intensely thought about nothing) because Robin could finally relax and let himself drift off.

In conclusion, Robin liked to sleep. A lot. And in a certain sense, a blackout was just like sleeping, but really, really well. It was long, intense and dreamless. In a way, it was Robin's ideal sleep. He shut down all his senses and just enjoyed his rest in the darkness.

"Man-spawn."

Of course, Robin didn't 'enjoy' is time in his unconsciousness per se. After all, he really couldn't remember (let alone enjoy) his time in unconsciousness. It was the same with sleeping, actually. The only way that Robin knew that he enjoyed his sleep was when he woke up and felt refreshed and re-energized. But that was enough. As long as he had a good night sleep with no interruptions and slept as long as he liked, Robin knew that the next morning he would feel great.

"Man-spawn."

And since alcohol induced unconsciousness was pretty much like sleeping, Robin had no doubt that the rules of sleeping also applied here. All he needed to do was get enough hours of unconsciousness in and he would feel good as new when he woke up. Sleeping was so nice…

"Man-spawn."

…At least, it would be if a certain voice would just shut up and let him be! Whoever the voice belonged to, they were interfering with Robin's plan to sleep the day away. More specifically, they were both interrupting his sleeping time as well as shortening the hours needed for a good night sleep. Robin could already feel himself slowly regaining consciousness. It was that feeling when he slowly felt each part of his body coming alive, his senses returning and his thought process picking up. And with that came…huh, that was weird. As he was slowly regaining consciousness, Robin also noticed feelings. Unpleasant feelings. He felt nauseous, dizzy, thirsty, achy, more tired than usual and a bunch of other unpleasant and unhelpful things. What's worse, the more he woke up, the worse he felt. What in the world made him feel this way? Was there even a word for it? Robin felt as if he was hanging all over the place.

"Man-spawn."

And there was still that damned voice. It was all its fault! He would have a few choice words for it when he completely woke up! Words like "what" and "hell" and "doing" and "are you" and "the"…not necessarily in that order. Oh yes, some strong words would be said.

Those were Robin's thoughts as he was lying (?)…wherever he was. Of course, by the time his thoughts made their way from his muddled mind to his mouth, the only sound that came out was a groan followed by other incomprehensible noises.

"Oh good. You're alive. That makes things much easier."

Robin groaned again.

Damn it. He was going to have to deal with this situation despite how crap he felt. So, with great effort, Robin forced his eyes open…only to still see darkness. Huh. That was weird. Robin was pretty sure he opened his eyes. Of course, in his current state of mind, he couldn't really be sure of anything anymore. So, just to be certain, Robin closed his eyes and reopened them again. Yep, still darkness and nothingness as far as the eyes couldn't see. Wait a minute. Darkness all around him, a feeling of pain and numbness and a mysterious voice talking to him. These were all suspiciously similar signs that Robin read about somewhere to indicate one thing. Gods, he was DEA-no, wait. The voice said he was alive. Being alive was the opposite of being dead. Thank Naga! So he wasn't dead. But he still needed to figure out why he couldn't see. And as Robin thought about it, he could only come to one terrifying conclusion.

"Oh gods, I'm blind!"

And to make it worse, his hearing was somehow damaged too! There was some weird echo type thing all around him, amplifying his voice and hurting his head even more than it already hurt. It was not looking like a good day.

Robin heard the voice sigh irritably. "Foolish man-spawn. You are not blind."

"Easy for you to say!" Robin retorted. "You're just a disembodied voice. You have no need for sight. I, on the other hand, need to do stuff. Important stuff that I can't otherwise do without sight. Oh, the horror of it all!"

"I say again, you are not blind. Let me prove it."

Before Robin could say anything else, he felt something being removed from his head and his vision flooded with light.

"Woah…it's a miracle!"

He wasn't blind! This was the most miraclest of miracles! This was the greatest day of his life! This was…this was… pain! Robin became acutely aware that the light was suddenly making his headache even worse!

"Argh! The light! It burns! Worst miracle ever! Worst miracle ever!" exclaimed Robin as he covered his eyes with his hands.

"Man-spawn, you are overacting."

"Urgh, easy for you to say. The light doesn't send waves of pain that make *your* head want to explode."

"Are you quite finished? I was asked to bring you to a meeting. It seemed important."

"No thanks, I think I'll pass. Just…let me do my thing here and I'll go back to sleep."

"That's not an option. Now come, I was asked to find and retrieve you. I shall accomplish this task…by force, if necessary."

"Ha! How can you drag me places when you don't even have a physical body to do so with? You're just a voice!"

Another irritated sigh. "I hope you realize that you're not simply talking to thin air."

"That's certainly what it sounds like."

"It would help if you opened your eyes."

Man, this voice sure had some attitude! Robin didn't really appreciate that. Actually, he didn't appreciate that at all. So, in his unappreciation of the voice's attitude, Robin decided that he would brave the pain and open his eyes…to… something. He really wasn't in any condition to make complicated plans. Or any plans, really. Or even complete his thoughts. But hey, doing something without any plan or end goal was better than not doing anything at all. Of course,

tactician Robin would very seriously disagree with this course of action. But tactician Robin wasn't here. Wasted Robin was. And to wasted Robin, any plan was better than no plan.

So, with tremendous effort, Robin removed his hands from his face and tried to open his eyes. The light was doing havoc to his head and the pain was excruciating. However, Robin soldiered through it and somehow managed to *not* split his head open and even open his eyes fully. It was truly a feat of greatness.

At first, the world was all blurry and Robin could only make out fuzzy outlines of things. He saw blurs of colors, in all shapes and sizes. The headache didn't help matters. Robin figured that there was a few seconds delay in his mind as it tried to work through the grogginess to try and process what his eyes were seeing. It probably took even longer for his mind to actually get his eyes to work properly as the world didn't seem to be getting any sharper. What's worse, he saw some brown blob thing right in front of him! It was tall and…moving? Wait a minute…

Robin squinted and tried to focus on whatever he was supposed to be looking at. The brown blob slowly cleared up. Whoever it was, they sure liked fur coats. Robin briefly wondered why they were wearing fur when it wasn't winter. However, these thoughts quickly shot out of Robin's mind when he made out more details of the person.

Robin stared uncomprehendingly. He didn't know what he was seeing and didn't know what to make of it (the delay in his mind also didn't help matters). It was like he was looking at a person, except this person didn't really look like a person. Their shape was person-like. They had two arms, legs, a body and a head. But she (Robin determined that this individual was female) had fur all over her body (Robin supposed that it *could've* been hair) and some sort of ornaments on her head. What was even going on today?

"Man-spawn, you're staring."

"Yes."

"Why are you staring?"

"I'm trying to figure out what I'm staring at. You're not human, are you?"

"No. I am Taguel."

"That…means nothing to me. What are you, some sort of bear thing?"

"Foolish man-spawn! Do I look like a bear to you?!"

"Ow! No need to yell." Robin rubbed his temples. "Alright, judging by that reaction, you're not a bear thing. So, what are you?"

"Do you truly not recognize one of your own comrades?"

"Uh…what?"

"My name is Panne. I was there when your castle was attacked and have pledged my loyalty to your cause. Surely you remember this?"

"I don't remember this at all. Granted, I'm not very strong in the memory department. I actually can't even remember what happened last night…and don't call me Shirley."

Panne rolled her eyes. "Regardless, I'm part of your fighting group. Furthermore, I have a task that needs finishing. Now come, you are needed elsewhere."

"Oh, alright." Robin said simply before the full meaning of Panne's words hit him. "Wait, you said you're not a part of us."

"That is correct."

"So, does that mean you're a Shepherd?"

"That is what you call yourselves, yes."

"Urgh, it's too early in the morning for this…" Robin grumbled before he forced his mind to work and think about what this all meant. What *did* this all mean? Why was there some beast lady claiming to be a Shepherd? Why did he ache all over and feel like roadkill? Why did-ouch. Too many questions made Robin's headache even worse. Best to stop asking and just go with it.

"Right. Well, I'm just gonna tell you straight up that I have no idea what you're talking about. But we can sort out those details at a later time, preferably when I can actually think straight. Now, you said something about some meeting?"

"Yes. One that I've been trying to get you to for the past few minutes."

Robin groaned. "Do I *have* to be there? I don't know if you can tell, but I'm not exactly in the best condition to attend meetings and make decisions. Can't they just…proceed without me?"

"I don't believe that's possible." Panne responded. "This meeting concerns the safety of this land and your Exalt. Since you are the overseer of things around here, I assume that your presence is mandatory."

Robin groaned again. "Damn work. They don't pay me nearly enough for this. Alright, let's see if I can actually get up here and we'll be on our way…"

As he tried to get up, Robin found out that he was surrounded by a bunch of pots and pans. He discovered this when they all came crashing down as he was trying to get up. Needless to say, all the resulting clatter didn't help matters.

"Argh! Noise! So much of it! Everywhere!" Robin cried before covering his ears and falling back down. "Ow, beast lady, I...I don't think I can make it. Tell…Emmeryn and the others…that my last thoughts…were…of them…"

"Stop being so melodramatic, man-spawn. You aren't dying and are well enough to attend this meeting." Panne signed again. "Which we're going to be late if we continue at this pace. Time to take matters into my own hands."

"Okay, good luck to yo-WAH!"

Robin could barely respond when he felt strong arms lifting him up and slinging him over a shoulder. The next thing he knew, he was being carried away. Now, that in itself wasn't the problem. Robin had no complaints if someone decided to take the initiative and carry him over to his designated destination. No, that wasn't the problem. The problem was that, in his current state of not being fine, Robin felt that he was maybe two steps away from expelling his dinner from his stomach. The being carried only increased his nausea and shortened the wait before the expelling of dinner.

"Uh, beast lady?"

"What."

"Do you mind slowing down a bit? Or taking not such big steps maybe?"

"This is the fastest and most efficient way to get to our destination."

"Yeah, but…do you like your fur the way it is?"

"What an odd question."

"You see, I'm about ten seconds away from throwing up and I didn't want to do it all over your nice furry fur. I thought asking would be the proper thing to do."

Robin just finished his sentence before he felt himself being thrown off the shoulder and into the air. Before he could figure out what was even going on, Robin fell back down…into Panne's arms. She was now carrying him bridal style.

"Man-spawn, I would kindly ask you to keep the contents of your stomach in your stomach. I do not wish to hurt a comrade, but I cannot promise anything if you do end up vomiting over me."

"Well, that's why I asked first. And I can't say that little maneuver you did back there helped any. Urgh, at least my stomach isn't being pressed up against your shoulder anymore." Robin said before he dry heaved a bit.

"Man-spawn, I'm warning you…" Panne said dangerously.

"I heard you! You don't think I'm the type to throw up on my friends without their permission, do you? Furthermore, I…I… uh-oh." Robin definitely felt it now. The unpleasant feeling of stuff rushing up from your stomach. The feeling that you had only a few seconds at best to run off to before the unpleasantness happens.

And because Robin was such a considerate friend, he immediately disengaged from Panne, frantically looked around, ran to the nearest window and leaned out. Just in the nick of time too, as seconds later he was throwing up pretty bad. Oh well, at least he did it somewhere out of the way where no one would see or notice.

"Why, if it isn't the ever lovely Sully!"

"What do you want, Ruffles?"

"I want nothing more than to simply be by your side and enjoy the pleasantness of your company, if you would allow it."

"Now why would I do that?"

"There are a multitude of reasons! Now, allow me to gracefully slide by your side and I can h-Wah!"

Sounds of slipping, falling and crashing.

"Damn, Ruffles! Have to hand it to ya, when you boast about your gracefulness, you're not kidding. That was the most graceful slip and fall that I've seen yet!"

"Argh. My dear Sully, that was simply not my fault! I seem to have slipped on something that was not there moments before! And…what is that smell? Gods, is that coming from me? What did I even slip on?!"

Well…so much for that. At least Robin was way up here and Virion was somewhere in the courtyard. All he had to do was keep quiet and the archer would never know what happened. It was best for everyone that way. Besides, perhaps that little misstep would actually make Virion more appealing in Sully's eyes. Yes, yes it would. Robin chose to believe that despite how utterly ludicrous it sounded.

"Are you finished?"

Robin looked to see Panne looking at him impassively.

"I don't think so. Wait for it…" Robin leaned out the window…only to back away as nothing more came out. "Nope. Got nothing more. Guess that does it."

"I appreciate you warning me and not vomiting all over me."

"Hey, what're friends for? And in terms of friends, I'm pretty high up there, ha ha ow…" Okay, apparently laughing also didn't help the headache. Good to know.

"Do you truly consider us friends?" asked Panne, seeming rather surprised.

"Of course. You're a Shepherd, which means that you're alright by us."

"You seem quite trusting."

"Oh, yeah. Enjoy that while it lasts."

"What?"

"Right now, I'm feeling various different shades of crap. That is good news for you, the newcomer, because my feeling like crap prevents me from going full on tactician on you."

"I do not even know what that's supposed to mean."

"It means enjoy the friendliness and freedom of movement while you still can. I'll grill you once this blasted achiness and headache pass."

"Grill?"

"Figure of speech. It means-you know what? That's not important. I don't have the energy or patience to explain. What is important is that we get going. Are we there yet?"

Panne quirked an eyebrow. "This is your home, is it not? Do you not know your way around?"

"That may be true, but in my current state of mind, you could give me clear instructions, a compass and a road map and I still wouldn't be able to find my way around. So, are we there yet?"

Panne looked at the tactician curiously. "You are one strange man-spawn."

Robin smiled. "Hey, thanks! People tell me that all the time. I like to see it as a compliment."

"Hm. Well, are you well enough to continue? We are almost there."

"Really?" asked Robin, quite surprised. "Already? That was closer than I expected. Where'd we start from, anyway?"

"The kitchen."

Robin blinked. "The kitchen? What were we doing there?"

"You tell me."

"What?"

"I found you lying in the kitchen with a pot over your head. If anything, you should ask yourself why you were there."

"Uh…"

Well, that was new. Robin couldn't think of any reason why he would be in the kitchen unless there was some sort of banquet and they needed someone to taste test all the food. And Robin was pretty sure that wasn't the case. He certainly didn't feel like he had a nice banquet the night prior. What he felt right now was tired, thirsty and a host of other negative feelings. Questions raged through Robin's head before he quickly dismissed them. He didn't even begin to wonder about the pot. After all, fewer questions meant fewer headaches.

"That's not really important right now." Robin finally said. "What's important is that we get to wherever we're going. Where is that, anyway?"

"Here."

"Huh?"

"Here." Panne repeated and pointed to a set of two large doors ahead.

"Wha-?" Robin stared. He then turned to look behind him and back again to the doors. "Were…were we walking all this time?"

"Yes."

The tactician just stared incredulously before rubbing his temples. "I can already tell this is going to be a long day." He then turned to Panne. "Thanks for the company, beast lady. Let's do this again sometime."

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Calling you what?"

"'Beast lady.' You know my name. Why do you not use it?"

"Well, you call me 'man-spawn.' In turn, I call you 'beast lady." Robin paused. "Are those not comradely terms of endearment?"

"No, they were not. At least, mine wasn't supposed to be."

"Oh. Well…I've got a very important meeting to head off to now, so I'll just be going. Will see and talk to you again. Bye now!"

With that, Robin quickly made his way through the giant doors and quickly closed them behind him. It's a good thing he got out of there quick, otherwise that conversation could've gotten really awkward!

Robin turned around to see where he was. He immediately recognized the palace conference room, with its grand table, intricate hanging portraits on the wall, the big chairs, the elaborate curtains and the large windows. Windows that were so large, they were letting in a lot of the morning light. Too much.

Robin winced and covered his eyes as all the light was hurting his head. Hopefully this meeting would be short so he could escape somewhere nice and dark. And then maybe curl up and die, because that is what he currently felt like doing. He actually felt like a dead man walking. Well, maybe half of one anyway. Robin briefly wondered if this is how Risen felt before dismissing the idea entirely. Risen didn't feel! If they did (and if they felt this terrible), they would lie in their nice and dark graves like good corpses and *not* terrorize the innocent. Damn walking corpses.

"Robin, we're all glad you could make it."

The tactician turned towards the voice and squinted. Surprisingly, the only people in the room were Emmeryn and her immediate family. Good. Fewer people meant fewer things to discuss. Fewer things to discuss meant a shorter meeting. Things were looking up!

"Of course. Tactician Robin is ready, willing and able and…" Robin yawed. "At your service, your Exaltedness."

"Wow, when you say it so convincingly, I'm almost inclined to believe you." Another voice to the left.

"Lissa, this is the best I can do at this hour." Robin grunted. "Whose dumb idea was it to hold this meeting so early, anyway?"

"Yours?"

"…What?"

"I'm pretty sure it was your 'dumb idea,'" replied Lissa. "I actually think you insisted on meeting first thing in the morning to discuss the situation."

Robin remained silent.

Emmeryn cleared her throat. "Alright, it doesn't matter whose idea this was or the time. What matters is that we are all here now and need to discuss our next course of action."

"Yes, that seems fair. Now Chrom, didn't you say that-" Robin paused. His friend didn't look good. At all. Now that Robin actually sat down and had enough time to put up a book to block out the sunlight, he could examine his friend in more detail. And what Robin noticed was that Chrom's head was all wrapped up in bandages and he was holding an ice pack.

"What the hell happened to you?"

Chrom groaned. "I don't know or remember. Something last night. When I try to remember I only see blurs and noises. The only thing I know is that I woke up today with a raging headache and a hole in the wall next to me."

"Don't forget this!" Lissa chimed in cheerfully as she held up some sort of cup and handed it to Robin.

"What's this?" The tactician asked before noticing that there was some sort of writing on it. "'Hardest Headed Shepherd – Chrom! (Sorry Vaike)'…What is this and why is it written in my handwriting? More importantly, why is my handwriting so messy and terrible?"

"Well," Lissa began. "I may not be a detective, but I think I can come up with a few scenarios wh-"

"Okay!" Robin interrupted, not wanting to go down this road. "I believe we're all here for a very important meeting and let's not delay it any further. So, what's the plan?"

Robin's hopes for a quick meeting were quickly dashed as they spent the next two hours deciding on what to do, how to do it, how to get to it, logistics, things that could possibly go wrong and what they could do to prevent things from going wrong. What made it worst was that Phila and Frederick burst in with a pile of reports just when the meeting looked like it was going to finish, adding another hour to the whole thing. By the time they were all done, Robin felt like he was two thirds on his way to turning into a Risen. To solve this little problem, Robin bid everyone farewell and decided he would get some shuteye in the meeting room while everyone got ready to depart. By his calculations, he had about an hour and a half at most. Plenty of time to get a power nap and feel as good as new. It was a good thing is coat had the heavy hood that could block out all the sunlight. Naga bless that coat and its all purposeness. Finally, Robin could enjoy himself in peace and quiet…

"Robin?"

Crap.

"Robin."

Maybe if he played dead, whoever it was would not notice him and go away…

"Robin, I know you're awake."

Double crap. Curse this person and their innate knowledge of knowing that he was awake! Well, Robin was not one to run away from a fight. He tended to face his fights and enemies head on. Non battlefield life situations were no different. The only difference was that he would have to deal with this thing quickly before his head exploded. Not the most ideal

situation but still doable.

"Yes, here I am." Robin said gloomily and without raising his head off the table. "What can I do for you…?"

"Robin, you could at least have the courtesy to look your partner in the face when conversing with them."

"…Maribelle. A pleasure as always. I have a very good reason for talking like this. It's a long and complicated story. For another day. Now what brings you to me?"

Robin heard a sigh. "Honestly, Robin. Do you intend to have the entire conversation like this?"

"Yes."

Silence. Robin assumed that Maribelle was either rolling her eyes or rubbing her temples in either distain or irritation. Or both.

"Very well, then. I have simply come here to give you this."

Robin heard something being placed on the table. It seems like this would require Robin to expose his eyes to the sunlight. Damn it. Robin felt around for the paper, put it in front of him and slowly raised his head and focused on what was in front of him.

"Urgh, alright. What am I looking at? 'Total Summary of Expenses at the Royal Bar.' What? Why did you give this to me and-Naga above! Why are there so many zeroes here?!"

"Indeed. It seems that your little party got quite out of hand, from what I heard. You did order sums of alcohol reserved for the grandest feasts. Quite expensive ones, too. That, and the damage done to the tables, furniture and walls account for the high price. And the gentleman tending the bar said that the one in the nice coat was kind enough to incur all the expenses. I assumed that was you."

"Heh. Nice coat, eh? Thank you, Maribelle. I'm glad someone else recognizes the quality of my-wait a minute. I'm incurring all the expenses here? I don't remember holding any sort of party or anything that happened last night!"

Maribelle chuckled. "You may not remember, but the barman sure does. He tells quite the stories, too. Stories that I shall not repeat here. But back on topic, how shall you respond to this bill?"

Robin groaned. Figures. You do something nice for someone and then get stuck with a crazy long bill. This would be the last time Robin did something nice for anyone. There was no way he could repay this! It would take years to repay on his crappy soldier's pay. Decades since he had to divert funds to the war! The war…Ah ha! That's it. Robin silently blessed the gods. Looks like there were positive things about war after all.

"Alright, Maribelle? I need you to take a message to the barkeep."

The noblewoman scoffed. "Robin, I may have brought this message to you, but I have better things to do with my time than run around exchanging messages. I'm not a messenger."

"Then how-"

"Donnel? DONNEL!"

"Argh! Shouting! Hurting head!" Robin cried and covered his ears.

"My apologies, Robin. But perhaps this experience would teach you not to consume such quantities of alcohol in the future."

"Is that what's causing all this?"

Before Maribelle could answer, another voice entered the conversation.

"You…you called Miss Maribelle?"

"Ah, Donnel! Wonderful timing. Our dear Robin has a very important task that he needs you to do. Are you up for it?"

"Yeah! If you got somethin' that needs doin', Donnel's yer man!" said the villager confidently. "Mornin' Robin, what needs doin'?"

"Morning Donnel." Robin waved his hand and put his head back down on the desk. "Now, you might want to write this down as it is very important and I'm sure that I can only say it once."

"Gotcha." Some fumbling noises. "Right. Got my pen and pad ready. I'm all ears."

Robin didn't even bother to think about where Donnel got a pen from. "Alright. I need you to take this…" Robin waved his bill. "Down to the man at the Royal Bar. When he asks you for the money, you have to say that all this is covered by the Ylissean Wartime Act."

"Uh-huh."

"More specifically, the Wartime Act Section Five, Subsection…" Robin wracked his brain. He just needed thinking power for the next minute or so before it could safely shut down. "Nine Five Two Dash Four Three One…B. If I remember correctly, it states that in times of conflict, the state may incur any expenses on behalf of key government individuals if it is deemed essential to winning the conflict. The expenses shall then be repaid when or if the conflict is won. So, tell the barkeep that Robin is invoking this section of the Ylissean Wartime Act to label these expenses as essential to winning the war."

"Uh-huh." Donnel continued to write furiously. "Say, Robin? What'd I tell him when he asks how this stuff's essential for winnin' the war? Seems like there a buncha alcohol on this here bill."

"Just…tell him that it was essential at raising the morale of the troops." Robin waved dismissively. "Tell him that the Crown Prince of Ylisse was there along with some key Shepherds. And they appreciate his cooperation."

"Alright." Donnel finished writing. "Anythin' else?"

"No. Now run. Run like the wind, Donnel. Time is of the essence!"

"Consider it done!" Donnel said and ran off.

Robin sighed in relief. At least that was taken care of. Now for a nice, quiet-

"That was quite impressive. I didn't know you were versed in Ylissean law."

Right. Maribelle was still here. How to quickly end a conversation?

"I make it a point to know at least the basics of my country of residence."

"That bit was not simply 'the basics', Robin. That law was conceived under the rule of Chrom's father to fund his war against Plegia. Once Emmeryn came to the throne, the reforms she initiated pushed this law into obscurity. I'm truly impressed you even know of its existence."

"Well, I like to read. You come across lots of interesting stuff when you devour every book you encounter."

"And to invoke it in such a manner," continued Maribelle. "I don't know whether I should be impressed by your legal shrewdness and knowledge or disgusted that you would use the law to so brazenly cover your expenses."

"Maribelle, this isn't just about me. We're not at war and may not to see the next day. This may be our last time to enjoy ourselves. Now, I may not remember what happened last night, but I do know that we probably had a good time. You can't really be putting a price on that, can you? Besides, he'll get his money back once we win this thing."

"You seem confident that we shall be victorious."

"Well, yeah. Our cause is just, our resolve is strong and our tactician is amazing. How can we not win?" If he was looking up at her, Robin would've now given Maribelle a cheeky smile.

The noblewoman stared at Robin before chuckling. "With your impressive knowledge of the law and your confidence, you would make an excellent magistrate, perhaps even a noble of some sort. Of course, your manners would need some serous improvement."

"Hmm."

"Oh! And I am perfectly equipped to do the improving. What say you, Robin? With my guidance, you could become a gentleman fit for the highest court! Well, I may exaggerate. Perhaps one of the more middling courts."

"Hm."

"Then it's settled! I shall make it my personal mission to shape you into a man of high society. I'll instruct you until you're fit to walk with kings!...Or at least a baron or two. How exciting! Now Robin, I'll hold you to your promise of victory and seeing us all through this. Lessons in nobility are no good when one is dead."

"Mmhmm."

And with that, Maribelle was off. Truth be told, Robin stopped listening a while ago and was thus unable to truly grasp the consequences of his agreeing to let Maribelle teach him the ways of the nobility. His mind slowly shut down and him mouth did its own thing independently. And it worked! What a genius plan. Looks like tuning out and agreeing to whatever people proposed got them to go away faster. Good to know. *Now,* it was time for that nice nap that Robin was so desperately-

"Robin? Oh Robin!"

You've got to be kidding me! How many people come into the meeting hall, anyway!? Maybe he should've crawled into some kind of closet.

"Robin, there you are! Is…is this a bad time?"

"It could be better."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" The familiar voice apologized. "I'll be back later."

"Nah, it's alright. I worked through worse. Besides, I always have a moment for you, Sumia. What's up?" Robin managed to say with surprising cheer before lifting his head off the table and yawing, coincidentally missing how the pegasus knight blushed and briefly turned away.

"Oh, um…well…"

"Sumia? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing at all!"

Robin looked at Sumia curiously but was otherwise too tired to proceed with this line of questioning. So instead, he went with "Right. Well, how can I help?"

"Oh, I just…" Sumia cleared her throat. "I just wanted to come over and ask you for your recipe."

"…My what now?"

"Your recipe. More specifically, for this pudding." Sumia said before Robin realized that she was holding a bowl.

"…Seriously, what?"

"Well, I was just heading to the kitchen to get a few ingredients and try out a few new recipes when I overheard the chefs talking to themselves. They were raving about how someone left some delicious pudding in the kitchen…as well as the complete mess. They gave me some and it was really, really good! So, I wanted to know who was the one responsible for this amazing pudding and asked around. No one seemed to know, but one of the guards remembered seeing someone in a fancy coat walking in and out of the kitchen with various different ingredients late at night. In the morning, the kitchen was a disaster area but there was fresh pudding sitting in the middle. Now, as the person with the fanciest coat out of all of us, I assumed that you were the mysterious master chef."

"Uh…"

"Robin, I didn't know you cooked so well! You have to give me a few tips, this pudding is *so* good! Hey, maybe we can share recipies!"

The tactician stared blankly for a good minute before managing to speak. "Sumia, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Huh?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Robin repeated. "I'm pretty sure that I've never cooked anything in my life and *certainly* can't make anything as good as what you're describing. I'm certain I couldn't be your mystery chef, despite the awesomeness of my coat."

"That can't be. The guard's description matched you. What were you doing last night?"

"I honestly don't remember."

"What?"

"Yeah. It's just all a giant blur. All I have is what other people tell me. Apparently, me and a couple of others did a lot of drinking. Then I guess I blacked out. And *then*, I woke up in a pile of pots in the kitchen with a terrible headache and a general feeling of crapness."

"Robin, are you having a hangover?"

"I dunno. Is that what this is called?"

"It is. From what you tell me, everything points to this being a hangover."

"Well, it feels terrible." Robin said flatly. "Any way to get rid of this thing?"

"Well, I'm not sure. But some of my novels have parts where the main character has a hangover. We could try some things from there." Simia suggested.

"Well, sure. Let's do that, then. Gods know I'm not sleeping any time soon."

"Great! You wait here while I get prepared. We'll have you feeling better in no time!" Sumia exclaimed confidently before quickly running off...somewhere.

She left her pudding on the table. Robin looked at it impassively for a minute. After five, he shrugged and decided to try a bit for lack of anything better to do. When he did, he found that Sumia was right. This pudding tasted amazing! There was no way Robin could've made this, it was simply too good. It was too bad Robin's mind was not in any condition to properly enjoy this amazing thing. Whoever made this this new what they were doing, that was for sure. While trying to focus on the goodness of the pudding, Robin failed to notice the flour, sugar, butter and other ingredients on his shirt. He also didn't notice Sumia returning until she put down a tray full of food in front of him.

"Alright! Here's the cure."

"You're curing my hangover with…food?" asked Robin rather dubiously.

"And water! Lots and lots of water. I read that all the alcohol makes your body all dehydrated so we'll have to fix that by drinking lots and lots of water and other liquids." Sumia said cheerfully as she poured Robin several glasses of different liquids.

"So, I have to drink and eat to get better?"

"That's why I've read."

"Can't I just sleep?"

"We'll try that after all of this is done. You'll also need to take a shower and walk around to get some fresh air."

"Sumia, I thank you for your concern, but I really don't think that-"

"Come on, Robin. Don't you want to feel better?"

"…Yes."

"I read that the main characters in my novels do this stuff and feel much better afterwards. It won't hurt to try, would it?"

"I…suppose not…"

"Then let's do our best to make you feel better! You do so much for us, at least let me do this for you."

"Someone's being very insistent." Robin chuckled. "Very well, Sumia. I'm in your hands."

"Thank you." Sumia smiled. "Now, I've cooked up a few things here that can help you feel better, nothing too heavy, but…"

With Sumia being so eager to help him feel better, there was no way Robin could say no. So he simply buckled up and did whatever she told him to do. Besides, Robin had no better ideas and he was actually pretty thirsty. Oh well, at least

he got a big breakfast out of this whole thing. That, and one very important resolution: he would never drink like that. Ever. This hangover business was extremely unpleasant and Robin had no intention of ever feeling like this ever again. This little adventure got him feeling like a Risen and almost bankrupted him. Those were experiences in his life that Robin could do without.

Chapter 16: Cordelia

If I had more willpower/wasn't so lazy, I could probably cut the time it takes for me to write these chapters in half. But hey, at least self imposed deadlines are a thing, right?

In times of war, one must be prepared. And in order to be prepared, one must have plans. One must have plans on top of plans. One must have plans for each and every situation under the sun no matter how remote the chances of those situations actually occurring are. Of course, this level of planning would take up much of one's time. In fact, it would take so much time that one would find themselves spending more time planning and almost no time fighting. And in moments when one was not fighting, one would be too exhausted to do anything other than sleep. The duties and responsibilities of a tactician were demanding like that.

Lesser tacticians might buckle under the pressure and work themselves to exhaustion, quit, or (in very rare occasions) die. Of course, Robin was not a lesser tactician. Robin was a tactician extraordinaire. And, as a tactician extraordinaire, he recognized that his initial process of planning was too time-consuming and inefficient (despite the fact that it brought him comfort knowing that he had entire piles of plans for some very specific situations). To solve this little problem and in pursuit of greater efficiency, Robin completely rethought his entire plan making process and replaced it with an easier, more streamlined system. Gone were the days when he stayed up until the wee hours of the morning to work on plans for situations that would probably never even happen. Now, Robin had a handful of general plans that encompassed many scenarios. Once Robin decided which plan to choose, he then went down a branching path of related sub plans and responses depending on the situation in which he found himself. The end result was that Robin could consult his spider chart of plans for virtually every situation. Start off general and move to specifics the further down you got a certain branch. This branch system also left Robin room to maneuver, switching plans or adjusting them depending on the combat situation. It involved less paperwork, freed up more of Robin's time and worked for virtually every situation. Maximum efficiency at its finest!

Granted, this new and revolutionary method of combat tactic making was so new that Robin only came up with it during the past week or so. The past week that the Shepherds spent on the road to somewhere safe where Emmeryn could stay and *not* get assassinated. So, it was more of a concept, really. He just needed a situation where he could test it out and see if it actually worked. Luckily for him, the war in which the Shepherds found themselves in was the ideal testing grounds. Being a war, there were bound to be battles aplenty. All Robin had to do was wait for when the next battle would occur.

Like today. About halfway through their journey, it turned out that their faithful guide was actually a filthy traitor and led them right into a Plegian ambush. Ordinarily, Robin would be quite perplexed by this development, but not this day! Because this day was a day when he would try new things and strive for greater efficiency! And the situation in which they found themselves fell neatly into Surprise Ambush Plan D, Branch F (sudden betrayal), and Environment Battle Deployment Branch E (narrow combat zone: cliff). After briefly looking over their enemies, Robin also determined that the enemy units also triggered Emergency Redeployment Plan A (wyverns).

So, after consulting his chart and taking in all of the variables, Robin quickly issued his orders and everyone's battle positions. Robin briefly considered going with Sumia and taking those wyverns out himself. He was (hopefully) more than capable now, being armed with Ricken's Elwind tome. This new, more powerful wind tome should be able to take down those pesky wyverns with one shot. Furthermore, Sumia's pegasus would give him more maneuverability and space to operate as opposed to the cliff that the rest of the Shepherds were confined to. Robin considered all these factors when deciding what his role would be. However, he quickly decided against flying when he looked down at the ravine. It sure looked like a long way down. And down into a river, no less! Come to think of it, flying and casting at the same time made Robin a bit queasy. His accuracy suffered too. The sudden movements in the air made aiming a lot harder than if he was stationary on land. He also hated flying. That last thought was what finally drove him to decide to give Sumia to Frederick's very capable hands and move on. Frederick was nigh unkillable and cut through enemies like butter. He also attracted a lot of attention, which would help Sumia sneak through and stab people when they were busy trying to hurt the mounted behemoth in front of them. Yes, perfect!

With that decided, Robin told everyone to prepare to engage the enemy and teamed up with Chrom (and his fancy anti-wyvern sword). Hey, Robin was almost sure that his Elwind tome could take out enemy wyvern riders, but it never hurt to be safe. And Falchion took out wyverns pretty well all on its own. With that reassuring fact in mind, Robin prepared to execute his plan.

It all went as expected. Meaning, of course, that they cut through the enemy ranks with ruthless efficiency. That was Robin's favorite type of efficiency! The only hitch came when they were approaching the enemy leader's location, Robin suddenly received news that enemy reinforcements were coming from the rear. That wasn't good. With their highly

successful advance into enemy positions, their flanks were left terribly exposed.

So, Robin decided to break away from the main group to try and assess the situation and see how much time he had before the reinforcements were upon them. He told Chrom to advance and take out the enemy general before going back for a better vantage point to calculate distance and time.

As it turned out, the time he had turned out to be very little, as Robin peered back and saw various dots in the sky flying in their direction. From the looks of it, more wyvern riders. Damn it. Things just got slightly more complicated. Only slightly.

Robin quickly reassessed the situation. He just needed someone to go and intercept the wyvern riders before they met the Shepherds and attacked their exposed flanks. Preferably someone on a mount to speed up the intercepting. He was already in position and even had a plan for this type of scenario in his list of possible battlefield scenarios. All he needed was call someone….except everyone was otherwise occupied at the front. That wasn't very good.

Robin quickly changed tracks. He *could* intercept the enemy reinforcements himself, but Robin didn't really like those odds. It looked like there were at least five or six wyvern riders and only one of him. Yep, definitely bad odds. Robin was now regretting not pairing up with Sumia. Her agility and speed meant he could meet the approaching wyvern riders head on and take care of them. Or delay them until they were in range of the mages (and Virion). Even Frederick would've worked! Well, this battle *was* a way to test out his new method of battle plan implementation and it worked…except for this little instance. Hey, trial and error. You don't know if something will work until you field test it yourself. At least this was a valuable learning experience! And Robin learned that he clearly needed to work out a few kinks for the next battle. If he survived this encounter, that is.

Just as Robin committed himself to engaging the enemy by himself, he heard a flap of wings, saw a flash of red and felt himself being pulled upwards. The next thing he knew, he was sitting on top of a pegasus that was already airborne and heading directly toward the enemy. He briefly saw more red and registered that he was riding behind someone. Of course, these were very short instances as his battle instincts kicked in seconds later. When that happened, Robin was all business: shouting orders, focusing on the enemy, attacks, defense, moments to shoot and cast spells, spell trajectory and other such things one tends to worry about in the heat of combat.

In the end, Robin lived to fight and improve his planning system for another day. And so did everyone else! The Shepherds survived, all the enemies were dead, Emmeryn was safe and the traitorous old man got an axe to the face. All's well that ends well. Robin could feel a pride at the day's accomplishments.

Of course, as soon as he and his mysterious partner landed, it was back to business. Robin didn't even have a moment to thank her (or even get to know who she was) as he was called to discuss their next move. And as soon as he heard what their next move was, all the post-combat good feelings vanished.

Apparently, Emmeryn decided that it was necessary for her to return back to the capital in order to reassure the people or something. Robin, Chrom, Lissa, Frederick and Phila all strongly advised against this course of action…to no avail. It seemed that, when Emmeryn made up her mind to do something, no amount of protestation would deter her. Robin had to admit, that was admirable. Less so when that course of action was tactically unsound. It also meant that this whole excursion was a giant waste of time. Well, not totally. Robin *did* get a chance to field test his plan execution method. That was something.

With her mind made up, Emmeryn set off back to the capital with Phila's escort. But not before handing the Fire Emblem over to Chrom. It didn't look like anything special to Robin, but since it was Ylisse's national treasure, it had to be important.

Shortly after that, it was decided that the Shepherds would all head north to Regna Ferox where they would be safer from Plegian raids. Hopefully the Feroxi army would arrive to guard the otherwise undefended capital and current ruler. Man, Ylisse's lack of a proper standing army was *really* starting to bum Robin out. Things would be so much easier if they actually had their own people to defend their territory instead of having to rely on friendly states. Robin made another mental note to petition for the creation of a national army after this whole war was over.

And so, the remaining Shepherds continued their trek back down from the cliff on which they were ambushed and started setting up camp. Ever the busybody, Robin, set off to talk to various Shepherds and make some notes on his roster. After all, the reworked planning system was not the only new thing Robin tried out today. And the first person on his list was…

"Lissa!"

The princess turned around and smiled. "Hey, Robin! What's up?"

"Nothing much. Just wanted to talk."

"Sure. What about?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes. You. As we're both aware, today was your first official debut as a pegasus knight. It was also your first combat mission in which you participated in active combat instead of staying in the back or running around the field healing people. So, I just wanted to see if you're okay, how you're holding up, how do you feel, are you sure you want to move on to the front lines, etc."

"Oh, wow. That's very considerate, Robin."

"Thanks."

"So unlike the usual you."

"Hey!"

Lissa giggled. "I'm kidding. Kidding!"

"I don't even know why I try with you…" Robin grumbled.

"I said I was kidding! Yeesh, you take things so seriously. Would it kill you to lighten up once in a while?"

Robin shook his head in exasperation. "Well, I can see that you're all fine and dandy here. I'll just go off and talk to others who *won't* waste my time."

"Robin, wait!" Lissa grabbed the tactician's arm as he was turning away. "Alright, I'm sorry! I'll be serious. And I *do* appreciate that you came to check up on me. Really."

"Really?"

"Really."

Robin looked at Lissa seriously before nodding and taking out his roster. "Good. Now, tell me about today. How did you feel?"

"Well, I'll admit that it was a bit scary. I mean, I actually had to do some fighting! And those guys were all buff and wielding axes and stuff! And some of them were riding giant, flying lizards! Those things are scary!"

"I know, right?! Finally, someone understands! Every time I convey my dislike of wyverns to someone they either tell me to tough it up of make jokes about it. Come to think of it…" Robin pointed an accusing finger at Lissa. "It was YOU who made many jokes about it!"

"Well now I finally know what you were freaking out about. Lesson learned. Wyverns are scary. Axe-wielding men riding wyverns are also scary."

"Yes, yes they are. I'm glad that I was finally able to impart this very important knowledge onto you. Wyvern riders are no joke and should be taken out before they get close to you. What else? Was there any trouble with the pegasus? Spear?"

"No and no. That Second Seal book you gave me really helped a lot. It had all the information I could possibly need to become a pegasus knight. Tips, tricks, advice and all that. On top of that, Sumia's been spending a lot of time training me in all things pegasi and spears. I've gotten a nice one from the capital and know how to take care of her, feed her, fly her and all that important stuff. I even got an official uniform tailor made!"

"Good, I don't know how you ever managed to walk in your cage dress."

"Hey! I'll have you know that's official cleric dress around here!"

"Really? How do you people even sit down? Er, question for another time. Now, what about the fighting? Did you feel confident enough wielding a spear?"

"Confident enough. I still think I need more training to really get the hang of it. When I attacked people, I don't think I really

did any damage. It's a good thing I read and practiced ways of getting away from enemies quickly! I think after I tried stabbing them, the axe guys just got angry and were ready to cut my head off. Well, they would've if they weren't already dead."

"Hmm, yes. We may need to fix that and get you a special spear forged or something to increase you damage output…" Robin muttered and wrote a few notes down. "Wait, what does that mean? 'Already dead'? Although you might not've done much damage, I hear you left quite a body count in your wake. How'd that happen?"

"Well," Lissa smiled brightly. "That's because I have the best bodyguard in the world guarding me round the clock! Isn't that right, Lon'qu?"

Some gruff muttering made Robin turn and see the swordsman standing several feet in the shadows. Robin turned back to Lissa. "How long has he been standing there?"

The princess shrugged. "I dunno. Probably this whole time. As my bodyguard, he's always nearby. It's just hard to spot him sometimes because of the whole 'not talking to anyone' thing."

More gruff muttering.

"But he's so cool!" gushed Lissa. "On the battlefield he still sticks to me even with my pegasus flying around. I purposely didn't go too far today, just to be safe. But wow! Wherever I was, so was Lon'qu. And he was so fast, too! Whenever I got up close to a guy and tried to get him, Lon'qu was right there seconds later! And after he was all 'stab stab stab', the guy in front of me was pretty much chopped liver. I mean, yeah, it was gross and scary and stuff, but we made it out in one piece. Man, isn't Lon'qu just the greatest?!"

"Uh…huh. Well that's…yeah." Robin then turned to the swordsman. "So, Lon'qu. I see you're fulfilling your role as fighter and bodyguard quite splendidly. Lissa is practically bursting with fruit flavor talking about you."

"I was simply doing my job."

"Yes you were, but you did it so well! Sticking to Lissa and not letting any harm come to her even in the heat of battle? Very nice. Also a nice touch stabbing dudes right after Lissa got their attention and before they could do anything about it. How'd you manage that?"

"I'm very good at what you hired me to do."

"I can see that. Congratulations on a job well done! You even managed to suppress your issues and fight literally side-by-side with Lissa. Is that progress? I think so!"

"Well, it would be if that progress actually came off the battlefield! But as soon as the fighting's over, he goes back to being all weird again." Lissa pouted. "Look at him. He's standing waay over there. Can you even GUARD me from that far away?"

"I can close the distance in the blink of an eye." Lon'qu replied curtly.

"Seriously? I'm nowhere near that fast! Here, lemme see how long it takes me to-"

"Enough! Stop trying to get closer!"

Lissa giggled. "You're pretty sharp! ...But I'm just trying to be friendly. How are we supposed to be best buds if you're way over there?"

"I'm close enough to protect you. ...And we are NOT 'best buds.'"

"Geez, what a grump! Why even bother guarding me if that's how you feel?"

"Because those are my orders...and morale would fall if anything happened to you."

"Oh, puh-leeeeeese! No one would care if something happened to me. Someone stronger would just roll my corpse out of the way and take up the fight..."

"...Do you truly not see how your presence energizes the others? How your smile and demeanor put everyone at ease?"

"R-really?" Lissa turned to Robin. "Really?"

"You didn't notice?" Robin asked, genuinely surprised. "Your personality and socialness really helps keep off the

tension. You go around, talking to everyone, listening, joking, and trying to make people feel better. You also help heal our wounds and try to do little things around camp. Questionable results and the not so occasional prank notwithstanding, you help keep us happy and morale high. Heck, look at me! I'm still talking to you despite the fact that you slipped cold amphibians down my shirt. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Wow. Judging by how angry you got those times, I guess it does. Thanks, Robin!" Lissa smiled before facing the other participant of the conversation. "Sooo, what about you, Lon'qu? Does my smile put you at ease?"

"Perhaps. ...From a certain distance."

"Ugh, why do I even BOTHER?! I'll see you later, grump." Lissa said angrily before storming off.

"Wait. I'll go with you."

"No you won't! I'm going to take a bath!"

"But my orders... You'll be... Argh!" Lon'qu looked conflicted. "Hmm, now that I think about it, there's been no sign of any attempts on her life... Either her would-be assailants are being extremely cautious... Or perhaps this is some sort of ruse? Are she and Chrom toying with me?"

"Well, what're you waiting for? Go after her."

Lon'qu turned to see Robin pointing to the princess. "Go!"

"Wha-?! But…bath…!"

"So? That could be exactly what the assassins have been waiting for! She'll be alone and vulnerable and they need to do is sneak up and do what assassins do best, or poison the water or something. Do you want that to happen on your watch? Do you? Do you?!"

"No, but-"

"No buts! Go after her and guard her body like you're paid to do. Just…you know, stand or patrol outside the bathing tent and look for anyone suspicious. If you find anyone, stab first and ask questions maybe."

Lon'qu looked hesitant before finally steeling himself and heading off in Lissa's direction. Meanwhile, Robin sighed and wrote down some more things for future reference. He was starting to doubt whether assigning Lon'qu was the right decision. Then again, Lon'qu did bring results, as shown by the most recent battle. And there were pretty funny situations with Lon'qu's issues and Lissa being, well, Lissa. So maybe this setup worked after all. Robin finished writing and smiled to himself in satisfaction. With that settled, it was time to visit someone else.

Being a relatively small group, Robin didn't need to wander far to find the people he was looking for.

"Frederick! Sumia!"

"Robin." Frederick greeted coolly. "Is there something you need?"

Ah, Frederick. Formal as ever. The knight remained so even during his free time and while doing the most mundane activities. That always got a smile out of Robin. He supposed it was reassuring that some things never change.

"Robin! Are you alright?!"

On the other hand, Sumia's greeting was the exact opposite of Frederick's. Instead of the usual "hello" that Robin expected, the pegasus knight rushed to him and started intensively examining him.

"Uh, hey Sumia. Whatcha doing?"

"I'm examining you to see if you're hurt." Sumia said without stopping.

"Thanks? Uh…why?"

"Because I heard what happened today!" The pegasus knight exclaimed and looked up. "We were doing so well and when I go to report to you, I hear you're off fighting enemy reinforcements on your own! I was so worried! Are you hurt? Did you strain yourself? Did you fight too hard?"

"Oh. Well, fear not, dearest Sumia! It'll take more than simple wyvern reinforcements to bring me down! I laugh in the face

of their attempts! Armed with nothing but by quick wits, good looks and my new wind tome, I have successfully managed to hold off the enemy and have not sustained a single injury!" Robin declared dramatically and struck what he hoped was a heroic pose.

"R-Really? So, you're not hurt?"

"Not in the slightest." Robin returned to normal and smiled. "But I appreciate your concern, Sumia. It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

"O-of course I'm worried! I mean, you're our tactician and everything! If anything were to happen to you, I…I don't know what we'd do."

"Aw, your concern for me is purely professional? Sumia, I thought we were past that stage in our relationship!" Robin joked. "Warm and fuzzy feelings instantly gone."

Apparently, the joke seemed to go right over her head as Sumia's eyes widened in alarm. "W-what?! Of course my caring for you goes beyond being 'purely professional'! I care for you a lot! Er, not that I care for you *that* way. Wait, no! I-I mean, I *do* care for you, b-but it's not like I *care* for you! I mean…" Sumia groaned and covered her face with her hands. "I wish the ground would just swallow me up right now…."

Robin chuckled lightly and decided to take pity on his floundering friend. "It's okay, Sumia. I know what you mean. I was just kidding."

"Robin, you're terrible…"

"Oh, I'm sorry! What can I do to make this better? Hey, how about a hug?"

"Robin, I don't think-"

"Too late. Prepare yourself!"

"Wha-Oof!"

Sumia looked up just in time to see Robin wrap his arms around her in a tight hug.

As Robin was hugging Sumia, he looked in Frederick's direction. "What about you, Fredericson? Anything bumming you out? What in on this feel good hugging action? I'm feeling generous today."

"I thank you for the offer, but I think I'm quite content as I am. Furthermore, how many times must I ask you to not refer to me by that ridiculous name?"

"Probably as many times as it takes for me to kick the habit. I can't guarantee anything, though."

Frederick sighed. "One of your many quirks, I suppose."

"Yep! I'd like to think they make me delightful and unique. Or, delightfully unique."

"Yes, well I would advise you to try and confine your 'delightful uniqueness' to yourself."

"What?"

Frederick pointed. Robin looked where Frederick was pointing and felt quite embarrassed. In his witty bantering with Frederick, he apparently forgot that he was still hugging Sumia.

"Whoops!" Robin released the pegasus knight and laughed in embarrassment. "Ha ha, sorry about that! I hope I didn't overdo it. Are you alright, Sumia? Did I hold you too tight? Man, I did, didn't I? Your face is all red! Were you holding your breath all this time?"

"I-I'm fine, thank you. And, um…" Sumia fidgeted. "I feel much better now, Robin. Thank you."

The tactician sighed in relief. "That's good! And hey, my patented feel good hugs are guaranteed to induce feelings of goodness no matter what the situation. Looks like you missed out, Frederick."

"As I have said before, I'm perfectly content as I am. Now, was there a reason you have come to see us or are you simply passing hugs around to everyone?"

"Oh yeah. I actually have things to discuss with both of you. Concerns today's battle."

"What about it?" asked Frederick.

"Well, today was the first time that you two have fought together. I just need to get your opinions on how today went. Is the chemistry right? Do you feel comfortable together? Were there any problems?"

"Ah, I see. Checking in on the soldiers after battle. A most noble endeavor." Frederick said approvingly. "Very well. Speaking purely for myself, I have had no problems with our battle arrangements today. On the contrary, I feel that our arrangement today worked quite splendidly."

Robin got out his notes. "Now why do you think that?"

"I feel that our partnership on the battlefield complements our strengths and covers our weaknesses. Although I am confined to the ground and milady is in the air, we are both mounted soldiers. Furthermore, milady's speed on her pegasus complements my slightly slower speed. While in the air, she acts as a spotter and can engage the enemy or point their location to me. When located, it pushes me to be faster in engaging the enemy lest they injure milady while she does combat with them or tries to disengage. My heavier armor also allows me to protect milady and draw enemy attention, allowing her to either flank them or retreat to a safer area."

"Uh-huh." Robin wrote down Frederick's notes. "I thank you for your opinions, Frederick. How about you, Sumia? Got anything to add?"

"Well," Robin was relieved to see that Sumia seemed to have calmed down and moved past the embarrassing episode of a few seconds ago. "I think Frederick got everything. I'll just say that I'm really grateful when he arrives while I'm fighting. When the enemies see the giant armored horse and the man riding it, they immediately move to attack him and completely forget about me. So much so that I can even get a few hits in when they're not looking! I'm just sorry that you had to take on so many enemy soldiers, Frederick."

"You needn't worry, Sumia. I am sworn to protect you and would gladly give up my life if it meant keeping you safe."

"Er, thank you, Frederick. But I don't think you need to go that far..."

"Yes, I second this opinion." Robin said while writing. "Keeping us safe is all well and good, but I think we'd all prefer it if none of us died. Let's just focus on keeping everyone alive, hm?"

After finishing his notes, Robin nodded in satisfaction. "Alright, good. This arrangement works! I knew placing you two was a good idea! Not like I like changing thigs up, but it's a good idea to try new things sometimes, you know?"

"It is always advisable to have a few backup plans just in case." Frederick said.

"Yep. I put my heart and soul into my plans. All for the good of the army. To varying levels of appreciation."

"What are you talking about, Robin?" asked Sumia. "We all greatly appreciate everything you do for us!"

"Thanks, Sumia. Although I wish *some* people would maybe show their appreciation more." Robin said and pointedly looked at Frederick.

"Robin, you're being ridiculous. All your efforts for us are greatly appreciated by everyone, myself included." Frederick replied to the not so subtle accusation.

"Yeah, well you could do a better job of showing it. I mean, your face seems stuck with maybe two expressions and they both scream disapproval."

"Then what would you suggest?"

"I dunno. You show a lot of enthusiasm when dealing with Chrom. Maybe something that?"

"I'm not sure you'd want that, Robin." Sumia giggled. "Do you really want Frederick running around and giving you as much attention as he does to Chrom?"

"Of course I…" Robin almost said before stopping and thinking about it. After some very careful thinking, he was able to see Sumia's point. "…No. I guess not. Huh. Maybe our current situation works out after all. The last thing I need is naked posters of me around camp."

"Robin, please. Milord has already made clear that course of action was perhaps a bit overzealous. Besides, if I *were* to

put you on new motivational posters, I would use a different artist. It would be much more tasteful and inspiring."

"I *am* quite inspiring." Robin said. "And I think I would look even more so with a dramatic wind at my back, blowing my coat for maximum inspirational effect."

"No. For maximum inspirational effect, one has to be naked."

"Why does anyone have to be naked for a motivational poster?"

"Because there is nothing more inspiring and motivating than the human form in all its glory. And you won't be totally naked. There will obviously be some tasteful censorship. I'm quite fond of scales. Perhaps that could also be the tag line. Something along the lines of 'Help Robin tip the scales of war'. Your pose will have to be decided, but doesn't that sound absolutely inspiring?"

"Right, this conversation just went to weird places. Firstly, why would you have me discard my precious coat? That's what makes me, me! Otherwise, I'm just some naked guy holding scales. The coat is the main motivator! Secondly, scales? Really? If I were going to be on a motivational poster, I'd imagine it'd be on top of a horse, fully clothed with a dramatic wind at my back making my coat flow majestically, pointing a sword to the horizon with a tagline like 'Follow Robin to victory!'. It sounds more glorious and forceful. That's way better than your idea. Sumia, back me up here."

When no answer came, Robin turned around. "Sumia?"

The pegasus knight remained silent with a faraway look in her eyes.

"Er, Sumia? Hello? You alright?" Robin tried snapping his fingers in front of her face.

"W-what? I wasn't imagining what you look like naked!" Sumia suddenly blurted out.

"Um…alright? Good to know. Now, don't you agree that-"

"Sorry, Robin! I-I have to go do…something! Important! Ha ha, bye!" And with that, Sumia ran off into the distance trying to hide her increasingly red face.

Robin watched Sumia's retreating figure and sighed. "This is the second time that people have run away from me today. Why does that keep on happening?" Robin then looked back. "Frederick? You're still here? You don't want to also run off into the distance?"

"I don't see why I would want to do that."

"Thanks, Frederick. At least we still have each other, eh?"

"For the most part."

"Huh?"

"If you excuse me, I have other duties to attend to around camp. As always, it has been…interesting, talking to you, Robin. Until later."

"Uh, right. And Frederick? The conversation of the last minute never happened!" Robin called after the retreating knight.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Frederick said back without turning around.

"Exactly. Thanks!"

Well, that wasn't so terrible. Robin got some useful notes and actually had a conversation end like normal (granted, he also had two people run away and sent one person off, but still). There was still so much do to and people to talk to. And Robin was feeling a bit tired after the battle and the strategizing and the walking around camp. So he popped into his tent for a little rest. However, as soon as he sat down in his chair, Robin heard a voice outside.

"Robin, sir. Permission to enter?"

"Granted." Robin said wearily.

As soon as he uttered those words, his tent flap was pushed aside and a woman with quite stunning long, red hair entered. Wow. That was unexpected. Quite frankly, she looked marvelous. Robin wasn't used to women like that entering his tent.

"Pegasus knight Cordelia reporting in, sir!" the woman known as Cordelia saluted.

Before Robin knew what was going on, he found himself standing up and returning Cordelia's salute.

"Whoa, that was weird."

"Is there a problem, sir?"

"Yeah, there is. I seem to have slipped into official formality without even noticing it. Wow. That really snuck up on me! I didn't think I even ever knew how to be official!"

"Sir?"

"Hm? Still very formal, aren't we? What's that phrase that lets you guys relax? At…ease, soldier?"

"Thank you, sir." That seemed to work, as Cordelia looked much less stiff after Robin said that sentence. "Since it seems to bother you, would you prefer it if I called you something else?"

"You can simply call me 'Robin'. We're all friends here. Friends on a first name basis. At least, I hope we are."

"Wow. I didn't realize things were so…relaxed here."

"We try to keep it informal. I find hard hierarchies and stiff rules affect unit cohesion. At least, they affect me. But I'm guessing it's different from where you come from?"

"Yes. The pegasus knight corps is very rigid. We have clearly defined roles, leaders and duties. We are expected to address each other with respect and professionalism no matter what the occasion."

"Wow. That sounds like a hard life. Don't worry! We'll knock that out of you and show you how to relax in no time!"

"Thank you?"

"No problem. For advice on relaxing wasting time, consult Lissa. She's our self-proclaimed 'expert' on the subject. Wait a minute…" Robin examined Cordelia closely. "You were on the battlefield today, weren't you? Yes. I think I remember you. You were the one who swooped in and swept me off my feet to fight the wyvern riders. That was you, wasn't it?"

Cordelia nodded. "Yes. I was simply performing my duties. I wanted to warn you about the incoming enemy reinforcements, but you were all too far. Then I saw you standing on the ground. You seemed to want to fight the wyvern riders so I figured you were an ally."

"Good call. Let me give you my sincerest thanks for the help today. Without you, I think my chances of coming out of that battle alive and in one piece would've greatly diminished. I really appreciate the help."

"It was really no problem, si-Robin. As I said, I was merely doing my job."

"I see getting the officialness out will take some time…" Robin muttered before shaking his head. "Anyway, what brings you to my humble abode?"

"I have recently been transferred to fight with the Shepherds. I've talked to a few people and they told me that you're the new tactician in charge. I thought it would be sensible to come to you so you can judge how best to use me."

"Oh. That makes sense. You're a member of the Shepherds, yes?"

"Yes. I've been with the pegasus knights but have now been re-assigned back."

"Great! This makes my job a little easier." Robin pulled out his roster. "Hm, this thing's getting too long with all the new members and notes. Maybe I need a notebook of some sort. Cordelia, you wouldn't mind answering a few questions for me now, would you?"

"Please, by all means."

"Now, as we have fought together a little bit, I do have some insight into your combat skill level. By the way, let me commend you on that. Your handling of your pegasus and lance skills were all very impressive! You struck with force and kept your mount steady enough for me to get accurate shots off."

"Thank you."

"It's also very useful to have another flier on hand. Now I don't have to rely on Sumia as much. Oh, do you know our resident pegasus knight?"

"Sumia's here?!" Cordelia asked excitedly.

"I'll take that as an enthusiastic 'yes.'"

Cordelia blushed in embarrassment and cleared her throat. "Yes, I do know Sumia. In fact, she's my best friend. We studied together. Last I saw her, she was still practicing on the training grounds in Ylisstol. Was she finally see combat?"

"She did indeed! And let me say that she was, without a doubt, one of the most useful units on the field. Flying really is an asset. And she gets so determined once she has enough confidence in herself. Great asset, that one."

"I'm happy that she managed to conquer her fears and get enough confidence in herself to become such an asset to the Shepherds. I will do my best and strive to become as helpful as she is."

"Well with your pegasus, I'd say you're already halfway there!"

"Only halfway?"

"Yes. Halfway. Because, as everyone knows, your contributions off the field matter as much -if not more than- your contributions on the field. So, tell me what you like to do in your spare time."

"Well, in my spare time I like to train and improve my lance and javelin techniques. When I'm not training, I like to walk around and see what needs doing. Restocking supplies, going over inventory, maintaining weapons, laundry, things like that."

"Hmm. Very nice. Helping around camp, doing little chores. Very helpful." Robin mumbled as he wrote down some notes. Suddenly, he stopped and looked at Cordelia with a very serious expression. "Alright, Cordelia? I'm going to ask you one very important question. Its importance is such that it may very well determine how I judge you from now on."

"My, such gravity. I shall try to answer to the best of my ability. Please, ask away." Cordelia took a deep breath in anticipation of a difficult or personal question…

"How well do you cook?"

...And released it when she actually heard the question. "I'm sorry?"

"Cooking. How well do you do it? Do you do it at all?"

Cordelia would've thought that Robin was joking if his expression wasn't so serious.

"I…believe that I'm an adequate cook."

"Only adequate? Not particularly adept in any area? Breakfast? Dinner? Dessert?"

"I would say that I'm capable of cooking everything given the right time and resources to an acceptable standard. I don't particularly specialize in one…meal time."

Robin thought long and hard. He thought so seriously about this that Cordelia actually started to get nervous. However, after an agonizing silence, he closed his eyes and sighed.

"I suppose that'll have to do. I'll need to get some examples of your cooking to properly judge its quality and see just how 'acceptable' the standard will be. I assume you can provide references?"

"For my cooking? I…suppose so."

Never before has Cordelia had such a strange set of questions and such a strong emphasis on food. If she didn't know better, she'd say she was being interviewed for the next installment of *Steel Chef Ylisse*.

"Robin, may I ask a question?" Cordelia ventured in order to understand new tactician's obsession with her cooking skills.

"Go right ahead. Otherwise, this would just be a session of me talking at you."

"Why do you place so much emphasis on cooking?"

"I place so much emphasis on cooking because I have discovered the secret to winning battles and wars. And that secret, Cordelia, is good food. I call it the 'Food Philosophy.'"

Cordelia looked confusedly at Robin and waited for an explanation.

"You see," continued the tactician. "Food is our energy source. Food is what give us the will to fight. It gives us strength, power, raises our morale and much, much more. And that's only regular food. Good food is like regular food, but better. It's better by definition. And by simply being better, it multiplies all the things I just said by a factor of how much better it is than simple, regular food. "

"While I do see…some valid points in your argument, are you sure you're just not overemphasizing the importance of food? An army can survive and fight with simple, food made from simple ingredients, after all."

"That may be true, but why settle for surviving when you can survive, thrive and CRUSH YOUR ENEMIES INTO THE DUST?! Good, high quality food gives you the inspiration to fight harder, better, faster and stronger than you have ever before. And with our well-fed army of soldiers, there won't be anything to stand in our way!"

Given Robin's…passion (?) for food, Cordelia hesitated before asking her next question. "Do you have any examples to prove your theory?"

"Oh, I do. I certainly do. Why, I remember just the other day I had just eaten yet another delicious pie from Sumia. I felt energized! Invigorated! Invincible! I felt like I could do all the chores around camp. And you know what? I did just that. In record time, too. I did those chores so well that I actually had time to draft some new plans, organize my files, update the inventory and go to bed at a reasonable hour. That pie lifted my spirits and sustained me for the whole day's activities. You know what happened the day after? I had a simple, plain meal. And you know what happened after that? It rained, that's what! And I was caught out while collecting firewood. And then I fell into a puddle while trying to get back to camp. When I got back, I found that my tent had a hole in it and that rain had ruined a pile of documents I had on my desk. Not only that, but I had to go to bed cold and hungry that day. All because of a simple meal. How's that for an example of the importance of food?"

"I certainly can't…argue with that…logic..." At this point, Cordelia thought it best to simply smile and nod. Robin was the tactician of the Shepherds and still her superior. He was also reportedly responsible for the string of recent victories the Shepherds had. Perhaps it was best not to question his food philosophy, no matter how…eccentric it seemed.

"Good! I'm glad we have an understanding." Robin said cheerfully. "I look forward to seeing what you come up with. Who knows? Maybe you'll have something to match Sumia's pies, or Stahl's roasted lamb, or Gaius and his, well, anything sweet."

Cordelia smiled. "Yes. If that's what it'll take, I shall do my best to learn every recipe available until I'm able to serve up whatever is needed for the army."

"Great! But don't overextend yourself. We want a really good something instead of regular good everything, despite regular good being good. Maybe find something to specialize in. We do have a lack of good soup chefs around here. Oh! How about-"

"Robin? May I come in?"

"Yes, yes. My tent is open to everyone at all times, apparently. I really need a sign of some sort…"

Robin's tent flap opened and Cordelia shot up as Chrom entered the tent.

"Hey, Robin. Oh, Cordelia? What are you doing here?"

"C-Chorm! Sir! Captain! Hello! I'm here, In front of you! And…I…" Cordelia tried and failed to form a coherent sentence. Luckily for her, Robin intervened.

"She's with us now. I'm just doing the usual checks."

"Ah, I see."Chrom nodded. "Well, it's good to have you back with us, Cordelia. I have no doubt that you can make us, and Ylisse, proud in these dark times."

"O-oh, yes! Proud! For Ylisse and the people. I'll do my absolute best for you and everyone!"

"Thanks, Cordelia. That's what I like to hear!" Chrom patted Cordelia's shoulder and turned to Robin, missing how the pegasus knight's eyes widened and her hand slowly went to touch where Chrom patted her.

"Hey, Chrom." Robin greeted. "What can I do you for? As far as I'm aware, we've already discussed our next steps during our last strategy meeting."

"Yes, I know. I'm just here to drop of the latest reports." Chrom said before unloading a pile of papers on Robin's desk.

"Aw, man. Come on!" groaned the tactician. "I went over a mountain of reports just this morning! How have things managed to change so much that I now have yet another pile in front of me? The day's not ever over!"

"I suppose the enemy's plans change as fast as our own. Robin, I know how hard you work for us and hate to have to do this to you, but-"

"No, it's alright. You don't have to say it." Robin sighed. "And despite my complaining, I'll sort through this thing and have a report ready for you within the hour as always. After all, sorting through piles of reports does come with the job, doesn't it?"

"Unfortunately so. Thanks again, Robin. You don't know how much all your work means to us."

"Oh, I think I have a pretty good idea. But your gratitude is appreciated. I guess I'd better get started on all of these."

"Of course, I won't keep you any longer." Chrom made his way to leave but turned back one more time. "Welcome aboard, Cordelia. It's good to have you with us."

All Cordelia could do was smile and wave as Chrom left the tent. A feeling of euphoria swelled in her. She was in the same, small tent as Chrom. She even managed to talk to him and get him to pat her shoulder! Cordelia would remember this day for the rest of her life…

The sound of shuffling papers and grunting snapped Cordelia out of her state of bliss. She looked over and saw Robin sifting through papers with an expression of grim determination.

"Um, Robin?"

"Hmm? Oh, Cordelia! You're still here. Right. Sorry about that. People tend to come to my tent regardless of what I'm doing and I apparently am incapable of sending them away. I swear I had a 'do not disturb' sign around here somewhere... Er, anyway. What can I do for you?"

"You seem to be very good friends with Chrom."

"Yeah. Some might say that we're the best of friends."

"Wow. To be best friends with Chrom. You must've known each other for a long time."

"I suppose." Robin thought. "A few months qualifies as 'a long time', right?"

"A few months?" Cordelia was sure she misheard. "You've only known each other for a few months and you're already best friends and can talk to each other in such a relaxed way?"

Robin shrugged. "What can I say? Chrom is trusting, I'm lovable. Put us together and you have a friendship of epic proportions. My tactical skills also help."

Cordelia blinked. "H-how did you two even meet?"

"Chrom found me lying on the ground in the middle of some field. Next thing I know, I'm the new tactician and we're the best of buds." At Cordelia's disbelieving expression, Robin chuckled. "I know! Even I don't believe it! But, you know. You make do with the cards you're dealt with and do what works. So far, this arrangement worked out for everyone involved. Why ruin a good thing with unnecessary questions?"

"I…suppose…"

"Besides, I probably wouldn't be able to answer those questions anyway. The amnesia really gets in the way."

"You have amnesia?"

"Oh, did I not mention that? Yeah, well, now you know! My life before Chrom found me might as well not exist. Can't

remember a thing no matter how hard I try."

"You do realize how suspicious that makes you sound, right?"

"That's exactly what I thought, too! And Frederick. Hooo, boy. He did *not* like me for the first few days. It's good to know that there are people who suspect things around here. Everyone else is nice and all, but trusting to a fault. Luckily, I'm not an enemy agent or something, otherwise you'd all be dead weeks ago!" Robin paused before quickly adding, "Not that I am! I hope the fact that everyone's alive and my striving to keep them that way proves my lack of evil intentions."

Cordelia stared at Robin for a long moment before slowly starting to laugh.

"Huh. That's not usually a reaction I get to my life story," remarked Robin. "But hey, I'll take it."

"No, it's just…" Cordelia took a few moments to breathe. "Your story. It's so ridiculous that it just beggars belief! Under any different circumstances, I would've personally dragged you out and brought you in front of a tribunal under charges of espionage after hearing such an obviously made-up story. B-but here we are! It's just so…crazy!"

Robin was very well aware of how ridiculous the circumstances of his recruitment into the Shepherds and befriending Chrom were. But seeing the red headed pegasus knight laughing so hard actually had him laughing as well.

After they both had a good laugh and calmed down, Robin was the first to speak.

"Thanks for the laugh, Cordelia. I can already tell that you'll fit well here. I look forward to working with you."

"Thank you, Robin. Likewise."

"Well, I'd love to continue our conversation, but I feel that I've got a pretty good understanding of you. And," Robin pointed to his pile of reports. "Duty calls."

"That's quite the number of reports you have there." Cordelia noted. "Have you ever considered getting someone to help you?"

Robin laughed. "I've considered getting some help, yes. But my system of report organization is uniquely my own and I cannot trust anyone to handle my reports lest they misplace and/or lose something. Which, despite the fact that we have some people who are as meticulous about these things as I am around camp, could maybe be somewhat counterproductive. But hey, Miriel already has enough things to do because of me."

"Miriel is the only one you've considered asking?"

"Realistically, yes. Maybe Maribelle, but I get the feeling she'll not want to be an assistant."

"Why not Frederick?"

Robin laughed again. "Yeah, right! While he is very...thorough in everything he does, I don't think I want him handling my reports. We'll probably be sorting out one pile for the whole day until it's absolutely, positively to his liking. Besides, the longer I hang around him, the higher the chance that he'll come up with an idea for a crazy fitness regime and subject me to it." The tactician shivered. "That guy. I haven't seen anyone so cereal about anything since breakfast."

"…Cereal?"

"No thanks, I just ate."

"Um…right." Cordelia decided to move on and try not to think too much about some of the more nonsensical things Robin said. "If you want, I could help organize those papers."

"Nooo. I couldn't ask you to do that! After all, I'm pretty sure you have better things to do with your time than sit and read boring reports."

"I don't mind. Besides, I did exactly the same thing back for the pegasus knights."

"Really?" asked Robin, visibly surprised. "You? Office work?"

Cordelia shrugged. "I like to make myself useful in any way I can. That may be on the battlefield or in the office. I don't mean to boast, but I was so good that they made me the general secretary."

"That certainly is impressive. Experience is always a plus…"

"And if you have a certain way of doing things, I'll be more than happy to listen and learn." Cordelia offered. "I won't quit until I've got it just right."

Robin thought and considered. It *would* be very helpful to have an extra pair of hands. With all the new people coming in and the war heating up, Robin's duties around camp were quickly multiplying (along with the number of reports he was getting daily). Having an extra pair of hands would free up his to do his daily round of chores. Then again, Robin took pride in doing things his way, especially when it concerned his paperwork. He had a system for filing and documenting and didn't trust anyone else with it. That's why he worked alone. That's also why he lost precious free time as the things he had to do increased. What a dilemma…

Cordelia sat patiently and watched as Robin stood there and thought and weighed his options. After a while, he finally seemed to come to a conclusion. "Ah, why not? I'm trying new things today, might as well continue this trend. Congratulations, Cordelia! I'm officially hiring you as my official secretary. Officially. And as my official secretary, your orientation begins now. Pay attention to everything as my way of handling paperwork is very strictly specific."

Cordelia nodded in determination. "You won't regret this, Robin. You have my undivided attention"

And so, Robin spent the next few hours giving Cordelia the finer details of his system of file organization and preparation. To her credit, the pegasus knight seemed to be listening and genuinely paying attention. That was a good sign. He would have to judge the results himself, but Robin dared to hope that maybe, just maybe, he could finally entrust his paperwork to someone else. It could be like that time Sumia helped him out when he was hospitalized, except the reports would actually get to him in one piece. And there would be fewer books…and pies. Oh well, sacrifices had to be made for the greater good.

Chapter 17: Anna

New chapter! Yay! A big thank you to everyone who favorited, followed and reviewed. After reading some of your comments, you have no idea how tempted I am to just turn this into some sort of harem fic. Tempted. TEMPTED I say! Maybe I will...or save that idea for a separate story. I don't know.

Also, an extra special thanks to mileyzfan123, who has very generously offered to beta this story. Do you know what that means, dear readers? That's right! That means that there will (hopefully) be fewer spelling mistakes from now on. Ain't that grand?

Duty. Free time. There was a fine line separating the two. That fine line also made it harder to juggle them. Spend too much time pursing one and you become either a carefree layabout or an obsessed workaholic. Truth be told, one of those was probably more useful to an army than the other, but bad for the health of the obsessee. Too much work and no play resulted in lack of sleep, irritableness, grogginess, a marked drop in tactical output and could lead to either exhaustion or death. And that didn't do anyone any good. So, finding the right balance between your work and yourself was key. However, that didn't stop it from being hard. It was especially hard when your duties multiplied on a daily basis thus reducing your free time, no matter how many corners you tried to cut. The various eccentricities of your colleagues also didn't help matters. Of particular note was that colleague who insisted on teaching you the ways of the nobility and claimed that you were party to this arrangement despite the fact that you had no recollection of ever having had this conversation and your certainty that you would never have agreed to such a thing in the first place. However, said colleague was (among other things) very determined to impart her "wisdom" upon you and wouldn't take no for an answer.

Thus were Robin's recent struggles in his everyday life. At Maribelle's continued insistence (and partly due to his own curiosity/willingness to amuse her), Robin decided that he would go along with this thing and see what the life lessons the noblewoman had to offer and what kind of a glance she could offer into the secret lives of the Ylissean nobility.

As it turned out, the Ylissean nobility's day to day lives were incredibly dull and full of various activities that seemed extremely trivial (and pointless) yet were somehow of the utmost importance. Robin thought that it was the biggest waste of his time that he could remember. "Teach you the ways of the nobility" Maribelle said. "I'll impart onto you the timeless values of the upper classes" she said. To Robin, she might've said that she'll waste hours and hours of his valuable time teaching him to do some very tediously inconsequential things. From her lessons, Robin understood that the nobility were a very strange bunch with too much free time and not enough to do in said free time. Why else would Maribelle spend an hour teaching him how to walk properly? Walking! As in the thing he and everyone else did all the time. But nope! Apparently they were all doing it wrong and there was a 'correct' way that the nobles did it. And that way was stupid and uncomfortable. Robin felt like a chicken with a stick stuck to its back. How the hell did people walk like this every day? Also, table etiquette. Apparently, that was a thing. A very important thing, at that. Why the hell did they have like, ten different types of cutlery for eating food? The starter set, the main course set, the dessert set, the bread set, and a bunch of other, miscellaneous sets that Robin couldn't bother to remember. And nobles remembered all the sets and when to use them and in what order. What a bunch of nonsense! Why even bother having different sizes of forks when just the one would do? What's more, Robin didn't even think that he ever saw Lissa or Chrom use these so-called "essential" skills. If two members of the noblest family in Ylisse didn't bother with this stuff, why did it even matter? Why did Robin have to learn any of this? As far as he knew, he didn't have an ounce of noble blood in his entire body. He felt as common as they come. And that worked well enough, so why change it?

Unfortunately for the hapless tactician, Maribelle wasn't having any of it. She seemed determined to drill into him the manners of the nobility and make some sort of noble out of him, no matter how lowly. The fact that Robin stubbornly resisted wherever he could and questioned the necessity of it all seemed only to spur her on. If Robin had to guess, he would've said that she saw him as some sort of challenge for herself. To reform this barbarian in front of her into one who would be fit enough for high society and such. Maybe like a pet project fuelled by pride and maybe her own personal honor. It was like one of those cheesy romance novels he and Sumia read. There would be the lowly lady who has to do some undesirable work in order to make a living. Then comes the dashing rich gentleman who takes the young woman under his wing and teaches her the ways of high society. Soon enough, the young woman has learnt enough to pass off as a natural noblewoman. Fast-forward past some drama and character development, and boom! The two of them fall in love, get married, and the lowly maiden actually does become a noblewoman.

So, Robin's current situation was like that. Except that he was the lowly maiden and Maribelle was the dashing gentleman. And they would definitely not be falling in love anytime soon, or ever. And she was a determined and harsh taskmaster instead of being dashing…and a gentleman. Also, he has absolutely no interest in learning this stuff. And Maribelle pretty much forced this upon him and wouldn't let it go.

After a grueling day of training in everything useless, Maribelle finally decided to end it there. Robin would've thanked the gods right then and there but Maribelle immediately scheduled another lesson next week…and the week after that. And the week after that. It appeared that Robin couldn't get away no matter how hard he tried. Of course, that meant that he would have to make up a list of plausible excuses and simply try harder. Yet another thing to add to the growing list of things that needed doing around camp…

And the cold weather didn't make things any easier. Damn Feroxi winter. Why did it seem that Regna Ferox was in a constant state of winter, anyway? How did people survive here all this time and get anything done besides freezing themselves to death?

These questions and more flowed through Robin's mind as he made his way round camp. Maribelle's nobility lessons had dragged on for hours. Hours that he could've otherwise spent doing infinitely more productive things. Since he was not doing said productive things, Robin found himself behind schedule. That was a position he hated to be in. But at least he had a list of things to do so he knew what needed doing. It was better than leaving things undone and only finding out about them when you needed them most. It happened to him often enough to warrant a list. And the current thing on that list that needed taking care of was…

"Gaius!"

"Oh, hey Bubbles. What's up?" asked the thief as he put a lollipop into his mouth.

"You know, the usual. Duty, calling. The calling of duty."

"And does your duty call you over to me?"

"As a matter of fact, it does."

"Really? What's so important that it brings you to little ol' me?"

"A few things. First of all, I would like to commend you on your actions in the previous battle. Sneaking around behind enemy lines and stealing their junk from those chests. Very devious, very helpful. Did you know that some of the stuff you got us actually helped fill the hole in our military budget?"

"Yeah, well they don't call me 'Gaius the Nimble' for nothing, you know?" Gaius said with pride. "I've been in this line of work long enough to not be noticed while stealing things. Heck, I can even steal stuff from right under some noses given the right circumstances."

"A very useful skill! Your ability to pick any lock is super helpful and convenient. Before you, we actually had to use keys to open doors and chests. Can you believe that?"

"Sounds like dark times. Well, no more! With ol' Gaius the Nimble, you never have to worry about any pesky locks ever again. I'll have 'em open for you in no time flat. And that's a Gaius guarantee, so you know it's good."

"Much appreciated. We'll be sure to use your lock picking services in the future, especially since you're the only one who has it."

"Great. Of course, I expect some payment for my very unique services. Nothing personal."

"Of course. And incidentally, that's another reason why I'm here."

"Oh goodie! Am I getting an advance payment?" Gaius asked excitedly. "My stash is running dangerously low and I need some coin to replenish it. Actually, I can take my payment in any of your sugary substances, I'm not too picky. A bag of those sweets I got when you guys hired me would suffice for now."

"Er, right. About that. Before I pay you and stuff, I need to know what kind of contract you got from Chrom."

"Contract?"

"Contract," Robin repeated. "Your Shepherds employment contract. I'll need to review it."

"My what?"

"You did get a contract when you were hired, right?"

"Bubbles, this is the first time I'm hearing about any contract. When I was first hired, the only thing I got was a bag of sweets."

"Dammit, Chrom. Looks I have to make another lecture on proper employment procedure…" Robin muttered before sighing. "Right, well this can actually work in my favor. Since you didn't receive a contract, I'll not need to fire you."

"Oh, alright. Great. Wait, WHA-ACK!" Gaius began before suddenly choking in his lollipop.

Robin watched impassively as Gaius coughed and hacked until he finally managed to expel the lollipop from his throat.

"Bubbles, what the hell?!"

"What?"

"You! With the whole firing me and standing there while I choked!"

"Oh, that."

"Yes, that! Why didn't you do anything? I could've died!"

"Not really, no."

"How can you be so sure about that? And so calm, too?"

"I have a very keen sense of when people I care about have a real possibility of dying," explained Robin patiently. "Call it a gift or a curse. It may be part of my tactician senses. Who knows? And those senses where not tingling in the slightest when you were having your little episode. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. And since I experienced nothing, you were never in any real danger. Simple as that."

"Really? Is that a thing with you?"

"Yep."

"Doesn't that make it really hard for you since, you know, war and all? People you care about could very realistically die in every battle," Gaius paused before adding, "or do you just not care enough about me? If not, I got some candy that may sway you…"

"Gaius, how can I possibly not care about you? You're our resident dashing rogue with a seemingly unlimited number of candy and a blood sugar level that somehow remains stable despite all the sugary substances you consume. Also lock picking. Some might say that your skills to pick lock are…key," Robin said and looked expectantly at the thief. "Eh? Eh?"

"What?"

"What do you think of my clever wordplay?"

"Huh? There was clever wordplay? Where? I think I missed it."

"Man, Gaius, come on. Did you tune out in the last five seconds of this conversation? I think my wordplay was appropriate. You know, with the key and you being someone who opens locks?"

"Wait. That was supposed to be clever wordplay?"

"Pretty clever, if I say so myself."

Gaius looked at the tactician quizzically before chuckling.

"Bubbles, you and I've known each other long enough to be open and frank with each other, right?"

"I wouldn't really say we've known each other for that long. Didn't you join like, last week or something? But I guess we did drink together. That probably counts for something."

"Great. So, as your faithful drinking buddy, let me tell you that your 'clever' wordplay was terrible."

"Really? That bad?"

"'fraid so."

"Was it at least funny?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Oof, tough crowd. When will I have someone who appreciates the fine art of my pun making?"

"Oh, I'm sure there's an audience for that stuff," Gaius said reassuringly as he popped open another lollipop. "I'm sure little kids'll think you're a riot."

"Gee, thanks for the advice," Robin said sarcastically. "That's the last time I come to you with my unappreciated puns."

"Dear Naga, no! How am I to ever survive the upcoming days without the patented comedy genius of Robin?"

"Okay, now you're just making fun of me."

"Was it that obvious?"

"…I hate you sometimes."

"It's part of my charm. The 'loveable' to my 'rogue', as it were."

"Yeah, well, keep playing the rogue and you'll have to find yourself a new drinking buddy."

"Come on, Bubbles. You pay me for fighting, picking locks and my honest opinion. Anything less compromises my honor."

"What? I thought you thieves had no honor. And really, I shouldn't be paying you at all."

"Whoa there, no need to be so harsh!" Gaius exclaimed before almost chocking on his lollipop again. "If it means that much to you, I'll laugh and every joke and pun you make regardless of quality. Please don't take my money away! A thief's gotta buy his sweets!"

"Okay, calm down. Here," Robin reached into his coat and took out a chocolate bar. "Have a break, have a KatKit."

Gaius gratefully grabbed the offered chocolate bar and devoured it in seconds. After finishing, he sighed contentedly.

"Better?"

"Much better. Thanks for that, Bubbles."

"Good. Now, the reason why we technically shouldn't be paying you is because officially, you're not part of the Shepherds."

"Uh, what? Then what am I, some kind of nonperson or something?"

"No. What you are is a private citizen who just happens to accompany us, the Shepherds, and render your services to us for no pay. A volunteer, if you will."

"But…that's not what I'm doing."

"I know. But officially, it totally is."

"I'm confused."

"Well, let me unconfuse you. You see," Robin began as he took a pile of papers out of his coat, "when you were hired, our dear Chrom forgot to give you one of these."

"And that is…?"

"An official contract proving that you're officially part of the Shepherds. Here you'll find your duties, obligations, rules, salary, vacation days, penalties and benefits of your Shepherdship. Everything you'll ever need. Without this here contract, you might as well not exist within the Shepherds."

"So, I have to get myself one of those contracts and I'm one of the Shepherds? That's it?"

"That's it. And I have taken the liberty of drafting one for you," Robin handed the papers to Gaius. "It's just a standard Shepherds contract with a few minor amendments."

"Oh, alright. Thanks, Bubbles. You're a real pal!" Gaius took his contract and briefly glanced at it.

"As you can see," Robin continued. "It's all there. All the information that you'll possibly need in order to-"

"Hey, wait a minute! Why does my contract say that it's temporary?"

"That's just me looking out for us."

"How is making me a part-timer looking out for us?"

Robin sighed. "Look, Gaius. You're a swell guy. I know that, you know that, and the other Shepherds probably know that. But, despite your swellness, my job demands that I look after the Shepherds."

"Okay…"

"That also means that I have to look after our reputation. You know, the Shepherds as Ylisse's paragons of justice and whatever. And as paragons of justice, we have to keep up appearances and hire accordingly."

"And…"

"And thieves don't really fit into that image. Come on, even you have to agree that thieves are all about shady business and don't really have the best reputation around. And I can't have the Shepherds hiring individuals with such shady reputations. If I do, what's next? The door becomes open to other individuals like mercenaries, dark mages and, gods forbid, wyvern riders!" Robin laughed. "Can you imagine us hiring wyvern riders? At that point, we might as well just be another mercenary group that just happens to work exclusively for Ylisse. And that's just bad PR."

"But…you're still hiring me, right?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I am! And that contract is my ingenious way to do it. Look here." Robin pointed. "This sets out the terms of your employment. While with us you get all the benefits of a Shepherd: medical insurance, dental, your salary, holiday pay, etc. However, all those perks are dependent on your following our rules. That means no stealing, breaking into people's houses or other criminal activity!"

"But-"

"And when you do steal, you steal from the appropriate targets. Meaning, of course, our enemies. Actually, don't think of it as stealing. Think of it more like securing our resources. Stealing is bad. Securing our resources is good. Got it?"

"Right. Well…" Gaius looked at the hefty contract in his hands and came to the conclusion that he really didn't feel like reading the whole thing. "What happens if I do something that this contract forbids me to do?"

"I'm glad you asked!" Robin said cheerily as he flipped to the relevant pages. "Here, you'll find the penalties if you break the terms of your contract."

"Ugh. That's a lot of pages and words, Bubbles. Can I get a quick summary?"

"Usually I'd make you read the whole thing for you to properly understand what you're getting yourself into. But since I've got things to do today, sure. Basically, if you get caught doing some shady things while still with us, your contract terminates with immediate effect. If the authorities come to us, we'll deny any knowledge of your actions. You'll be cut off from our resources, have to pay your legal fees yourself and be subject to the laws of whatever land you're caught in."

"…Really?" Gaius looked at the smiling tactician's face. "Really? Gods above, Bubbles. Dem's some pretty rough terms. I'm risking my life here for you guys. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"Well, that is true…" Robin considered this for a moment. "I suppose you do deserve some leniency for fighting with us. Fine. If you get caught in Ylisse, we'll try to have you put in a nice prison. How about that?"

"That's the best you can do?"

"Hey, leave me alone. We have no jurisdiction outside Ylisse and we can't give you a free get out of jail free card because that's just corrupt! No one should be above the law, Shepherd or otherwise."

"…You've been spending time with Maribelle, haven't you?"

"How'd you know?"

"Just a hunch. So," Gaius sighed. "I have to agree to all these terms if I want to remain part of the Shepherds, huh? No leeway on the penalties?"

"Sorry Gaius. That's as far as I can go."

"Hm, can't you at least sweeten the pot? Like, a signing bonus or something?"

"Well, I suppose I can find you something. But the only thing I have on me right now is…" Robin rummaged through his coat pockets before pulling something out and looking at it with disdain. "…this."

"Woah!" The thief's eyes widened as he saw what Robin held. "I-is that what I think it is?"

"If you think it's a chocolate pineapple, then you'd be correct."

"It's not just a chocolate pineapple! It's Perry's Chocolate Pineapple! A recreation of a pineapple with loving detail with the finest chocolate around! It's even up to scale. Look at all that chocolate…"

"Yeah, I know. What I don't know is what the hell I was thinking when I bought this stupid thing!" Robin shook his head. "I spent a good part of my salary on this thing, too! And for what? I don't even like chocolate all that much! That damn merchant. Smooth talked me into buying this and other useless junk. When I find her, I'll give her a piece of my mind!"

Robin finished his rant and looked over at Gaius. The thief was silent and drooling, his eyes fixated on the item in Robin's hand.

"Hey, you want it?"

That seemed to snap Gaius out of whatever trance we has in.

"Huh?"

"This chocolate thing. What it?"

Gaius made some hacking and sputtering noises.

"Great. Now, I just need you to sign on the dotted line and-ACK!"

Robin was interrupted as Gaius suddenly ran up and hugged him tightly.

"Bubbles, this is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. You're…you're a real pal, you know that? Giving me this… this precious thing of chocolatey beauty, it's making me all warm and fuzzy inside. I promise that I'll stick with you guys until the very end! Ugh, damn it, I'm tearing up. Okay, let's do this quick."

Gaius then disengaged, grabbed the pen from the tactician's hand, signed wherever he had to, threw the papers back, grabbed the chocolate pineapple and ran off to his tent.

Robin just stood there in stunned silence. He then looked at the signed contract in his hands and decided that everything worked out. His goal was to get Gaius to agree to his new terms of employment, and that task was accomplished. Sure, it took giving Gaius an overpriced piece of chocolate that Robin bought with his own money, buy hey. Mission accomplished.

"Urgh, damn it."

Robin turned around to see who the voice belonged to.

"Sully? Hey, what's u-whoa. What the hell happened to you?"

The knight grunted. "Hey, Robin. Nothing I can't handle. Just some training bruises."

Robin whistled. "Those look like some serious bruises, Sully. Who'd you go up against? Chorm?"

"No at this stage."

"Frederick?"

"I wish."

"…Vaike?"

"Har! That's a good one! I already beat the crap out of him on multiple occasions. And I'll continue to do so no matter how many times he comes back at me!" Sully declared before grunting in pain and holding her side. "No, I finally won against Stahl today."

"Didn't you already do that? Many, many times?"

"Yeah, but those times didn't count. That damn sissy was giving in way to fast and not even trying. Well, after all this time, I finally got him to fight at his full potential. And damn, he fights like a bloody beast when he puts his mind to it!"

Robin blinked. "Really? Stahl? Sir Average? …Really?"

"You think I'm making this up?"

"I suppose not. Oh well. At least you managed to win, right?"

"You get your ass I did! Just one more step on the path to greatness. All these bruises are just inconveniences that need to be toughed out."

"That's the spirit!"

"Yeah. Now I'll just need to tough this out in my tent. Maybe lie down for a couple hours…"

"Great job, Sully. Keep it up. We all believe in you!" Robin waved and watched Sully limp toward her tent before getting out his long list of things to do for today. He then frowned. It sure was long, and he wasn't even halfway done. Damn Maribelle and her useless lessons in wasting time.

Robin sighed. Looks like it would be another late night. The next thing he had to do was talk to Panne and inform her of the fact that she too needed to sign a contract. But…that could wait. Panne was always there. Paperwork was too. The only difference was that paperwork multiplied. Panne, despite being a rabbit, did not (which maybe needed to change. She was pretty useful when transformed. A giant rampaging bunny did give enemies pause before it ripped their faces off. Having a whole battalion of them would be tactically advantageous. Panne only needed a partner to get her reproduction on. If only she didn't hate humans so much. Hm, Robin made a mental note to explore this area further). But now, paperwork awaited.

Ah, paperwork. If Robin had to choose anyone to be his arch-nemesis, it would be paperwork. He did combat with his nemesis every day. Although he triumphed every time, paperwork would return the next day (and sometimes that same day) to demand another match. And they would both do battle again, repeating the never-ending cycle. It was a worthy nemesis if ever there was one: undying, never-ending and ever multiplying. But inevitably, it always fell by the wayside! The only downside was that paperwork took time. That was the dastardly consequence of doing battle with it every day. Yet, it did push Robin to be a better tactician, in a way. It pushed him because he always strove to find new ways of going through it in a more effective manner. And today would be no different. Now, standing outside his tent, Robin took a deep breath and prepared to do battle once again.

As soon as he entered his tent, Robin knew something was…off. For one, it was clean. Too clean. Clean enough to look like his tent after he was done with all the paperwork and after he meticulously placed everything in its proper place. But that couldn't be right. Robin was pretty sure he didn't get to do his paperwork yet and didn't enter his tent since breakfast. But his tent was clean and organized in a way that was only possible if he himself cleaned it. So…did he do it unconsciously and just wipe that part of his memory? It probably wouldn't be the first time. Huh. What a conundrum…

"Oh, Robin. I'm glad you're here."

"Hmm?" The tactician turned. "Cordelia? What're you doing here?"

"Well, I was waiting for you to discuss some things with you, but you never came. Then, a fresh batch of reports was delivered to your tent. Since you weren't here, I took the liberty of sorting them out for you. I hope you don't mind."

Robin looked around incredulously before turning back. "You…you did this?"

"Yes. Is it to your liking?"

"It's so…clean! And neat…and tidy!"

"I did everything you told me at orientation. Put everything where you like it and organized the papers based on your system."

"…"

"Er, Robin? Are you alright?" Cordelia asked somewhat nervously. "You've gone quiet. I tried to follow your instructions as best as I could, but please, tell me if there's anything I missed so I can improve next time."

"Are you kidding me?!" Robin's sudden exclamation caught Cordelia off guard and she stepped back in surprise. "Look at everything! Look! It's all so neat and organized and everything is in the right place and in such neatly organized piles! It's as if I did it all. Me! Myself! But is wasn't me. Do you know who it was?"

"…Me?"

"Yes, you! Wonderful, glorious, amazing, talented and attentive Cordelia, you!" Robin turned to the confused pegasus knight. "You listened to everything I said during orientation. Not only that, but you carried out all this stuff so well, so perfectly, that I'm feeling feelings of euphoria just looking at my neat tent of utmost neatness. That, and dizziness. But good dizziness."

"Um, well…" Cordelia blushed slightly in embarrassment. "I thank you for such high praise, Robin. But it was really nothing, I just-"

"Oh, it was more than just 'nothing.' In fact, it was more like 'something.' Something big, I might add! You have achieved a level of organization that makes me high on excitement. Do you know what kind of achievement that is? It is the greatest secretarial achievement of all time, is what it is! Here. Lemme give you the Robin congratulatory hug of utmost amazingness."

"Oh, I don't think that's really neces-"

But Cordelia was interrupted as Robin quickly closed the distance between them and embraced her tightly. If she was only blushing slightly before, Cordelia's face was now as red as her hair. She fidgeted uncomfortably. "U-um, Robin? While I understand that you're happy with my work, can you…let me go now?"

"Give it a few more seconds," Robin said, unmoving. "Does my hugging make you uncomfortable? Would you rather I kiss you instead?"

"W-what?! Kiss?! I-I…No!" Cordelia stammered as her face increased in redness. "Robin, why would you even suggest that?"

"Seeing your work on my office makes me indescribably happy. It makes me so happy that I cannot contain my happiness and have to express it in some way or another. These are just the most effective ways to do so."

"Robin, please!" Cordelia said nervously as tried to wiggle free. "What if someone saw us like this? What would they think?"

"Well, they would come in, they would see how clean my tent is and they would see me hugging you. Then, they would think 'wow, this is a really well-organized tent. It's like Robin did it himself. But since he's hugging Cordelia with a very happy expression, it could only mean that it was she who organized everything so efficiently. Wow, she's the greatest secretary in the world! I wish I had such a secretary.' Why? What else are they supposed to think?"

Cordelia remained silent. Robin didn't seem bothered by the sudden close personal contact and talking would probably not get him to release her anytime soon. And she supposed that people usually announced themselves or asked permission to enter Robin's tent. She could probably endure the embarrassment until he let go of her on his own volition. It wouldn't be too long now. Besides, it didn't feel unpleasant…

"Mmm, right. Well!" Robin finally released Cordelia from the hug and smiled. "I don't know about you, but I feel energized and invigorated. Let's go through all these neat, neat piles and get some work done!"

"Urm, yes. Well…" Cordelia straightened out her clothes and tried to regain her composure after the sudden display of affection on Robin's part. "Just as you asked, I've organized the recent documents in piles according to urgency, type and content. The ones on top of the piles are the ones that demand your immediate attention."

"Yes, I see. Thank you again, Cordelia. Your work is greatly appreciated. But enough about that. I'll rave about it some more after we're done here. Now, the first thing that needs looking over is…" Robin reached for the first document on the pile and frowned. "Inventory."

"Yes. It's quite urgent. I've taken all the inventory checks before and after our most recent battles and found, well, it's all there."

Robin sighed. "I know, I know. With all the fighting that we've been doing, our equipment's been breaking faster than we've been able to replace it. But I have a very good reason for not buying new stuff!"

"I know. I've looked over our budget and our recent purchases as well as the prices of all the local merchants that we've

visited. There all in this list here."

"Wow. You are just on fire today!"

Cordelia shrugged. "It's nothing. I just like to stay on top of things. Anyway, the merchants. The problem is that their prices for weapons go above our budget, isn't it?"

"Yes. That's exactly the problem. Have you seen what they charge for simple iron weapons? It's robbery and extortion, plain and simple! You'd think they'd charge less for the force defending them from the enemy, but nope! They're all thieves and crooks, the lot of them!"

"Robin, I understand your concerns, but our current arsenal of combat worthy weapons is diminishing after every battle. Soon enough, we'll have nothing to fight the enemy with. Is it not worth buying weapons at inflated prices and run a deficit for now? Our very survival does depend on it."

"I refuse to spend our hard earned money on these outrageous prices! And running deficits is for the financially irresponsible, something that we are not. Those merchants are all in cahoots with each other and I refuse to play their game. We'll just have to shop around and find an alternative supplier or, you know, loot from our enemies. They have quality weapons on them…sometimes."

Cordelia sighed. "Robin, do you really think that's the best course of action? You're putting us in a very precarious situation here. I estimate that we only have a handful of weapons that we can use for the next battle. They're so few that we don't even have enough for all the Shepherds. As your friend and secretary, I highly advise against this course of action."

"Thank you for your advice, Cordelia. It's noted. But I have a feeling that something's going to come up. Something soon. Call it a hunch. And," Robin raised a hand as Cordelia looked about to protest. "I know that I shouldn't base our wellbeing on a hunch, and I'm not. I have a few plans here and there on how to get the most of our current weapons. In the meantime, we wait. Heh, who knows? Perhaps the gods will see it fit to send me a magical merchant who sells me goods at incredibly affordable prices."

"Did someone say 'affordable prices'?"

"GAH!" Robin jumped up in surprise. When he looked at his tent entrance, he saw a familiar face with that same damn smile. "You! Devil merchant!" he exclaimed and pointed an accusing finger.

"Hmph, rude!" pouted the merchant. "Our first time meeting and you're already calling me names. People usually wait until they see their bill before they do that. And I have a name, you know!"

"Oh, I know! You're Anna the silver tongued devil merchant from hell! I have a bone to pick with you!"

"Wow, someone certainly is riled up," Anna said before she took in the scene and smiled mischievously. "Or is it because I've caught you two in a private moment? Should I come back at a more convenient time?"

"The hell are you talking about?"

"Wha-?! You've got it all wrong! Th-there's nothing going on here!" a very panicked sounding voice responded before Robin could say anything. And before he could do anything, Robin suddenly found himself on the hard ground. As he was lying there, he also saw a red-faced Cordelia holding her hands up in the air. Well, that explained things. It certainly explained why Robin didn't feel the ground when he jumped up in surprise at Anna's unannounced intrusion. Of course, then Cordelia dropped him and now his head hurt.

"Gods, I'm so sorry!" Cordelia apologized as she helped the tactician up. "I panicked there. It happened so suddenly that I didn't know what to do! We were alone, then Anna came in and-"

"It's fine. Haven't fallen on the ground in a while. I guess I was due for it eventually. Now," Robin grumbled and rubbed the back of his head. He then glared at the intruding merchant. "To what do I owe this…pleasure, Anna? Come to sweet talk me into buying more overpriced junk?"

"Who? Me?" Anna asked innocently. "I would never, ever scam a good friend. They would deserve a…most reasonable discount on all my wares!"

"Liar! Why just the other day you-" Robin was interrupted as Cordelia whispered something in his ear. "Oh. Right. Identical sisters and whatever. Hmph. Thanks, Cordelia."

Robin took a deep breath to calm himself. "Alright. I apologize for my earlier outburst. It's just that one of your sisters was unscrupulous enough to take advantage of me and rob me blind in exchange for crap. But I suppose that isn't really your fault. So, what do you want?"

"No hard feelings. It's just business, you see. Speaking of business," Anna approached the tactician and handed him a huge magazine. "Here."

Robin looked at the magazine quizzically. "What am I looking at?"

"This is the entire catalogue of goods available for purchase from Anna & Anna Co. Limited. Our family run business."

"Anna, I don't need to look through a magazine to know that your prices are stupidly high. I talked to your sisters, remember? There's no way I'm giving you a penny for anything."

"Ah, but I think you'll change your mind when you hear about your special discount!"

"You're giving me a discount?"

"You bet! And a very special one, too. One that's only available to our best customers!"

Robin looked at the merchant suspiciously. "Why?"

Anna smiled brightly (and what Robin assumed was her best saleswoman smile). "Because you are all very special friends of Anna & Anna Co. Limited. Not only have you helped one of my sisters, you have also – until recently – spent sizable sums of gold buying goods from us. Furthermore, you've helped me out of a sticky situation recently. All that makes you very special people and eligible for the Friends of Anna Special People's Discount. It's a once in a lifetime offer! Grab it while you still can!"

Robin still didn't look convinced. "That seems awfully generous of you. What's the catch?"

"That's the beauty of it! There is no catch! None! This special, one of a kind discount is yours with no strings attached! You'll just have to sign some forms and then your discount will be effective in every Anna & Anna store! And as an added bonus, I'll be accompanying you on your journey to ensure the safety of the goods, their timely delivery and customer satisfaction!"

"Wait, let me see if I heard that right. You want to accompany us as we trek through the country and war with the enemy?" Robin asked incredulously.

"It's the least I can do for all that you've done for me and my sisters. Besides, that handsome leader of yours already invited me to join your little party. I thought I'd just come to you with an offer to butter you up."

Robin turned to Cordelia. "This true?"

"It is," replied the pegasus knight. "It's actually one of the things that I wanted to talk to you about, but I thought the inventory should take priority."

"No, you're right. That issue is the number one priority. Or, it was. Now, however…" Robin turned to Anna. "So, you want to offer us a discount in exchange for your joining us and I assume exclusive rights to arm the Shepherds, right? What kind of discount we talking about here?"

"A very good observation and question!" Anna said cheerily. "The size of your discount as well as the suggested terms of its usage are exactly why I'm here. We can iron out these details while negotiating. Once that's done, we'll sign a contract and make it legally binding. Everybody wins!"

"Contract negotiation, huh? Alright," Robin cracked his knuckles and sat at his desk. He then turned to other occupant in the tent. "Cordelia, can we postpone our meeting today. Something suddenly came up and I have to talk business."

"I'm sorry Robin, but I can't do that."

"Thank you, I-what? Why not?"

"Robin, remember what happened the last time you were left alone with Anna?" Cordelia asked pointedly.

"Urgh, don't remind me," Robin grumbled. It was the time he lost half his months' wages on useless things including that overpriced chocolate pineapple. "It's an incident I'd much rather forget."

"Yes, well after said incident, you came and complained to me for what seemed like a few hours before I suggested that I sit in with you next time you talk business with an Anna. You then said that idea was the best thing you've heard all week and made me promise to carry it out no matter what you said."

"Oh. Huh. That sounds like something I'd do. Alright! Cordelia, you shall be my official number two and chair this meeting with me!" Robin then turned to address Anna. "I guess some introductions are in order. Cordelia, Anna. Anna, Cordelia. She's my secretary, advisor and quickly becoming many other things that I needed but didn't realize how much until she came along. Now then, Anna. Let's discuss the terms of your employment and supply, shall we?"

"Certainly!" Anna said as she sat down and shook Cordelia's hand. "Pleasure to officially meet you both. As for the contract, I have a bog standard one right here with me. You can look over it and we can amend the terms as we go along."

Anna took out a big pile of papers out of her bag and placed it on Robin's desk.

"Well, there goes the rest of my evening…" muttered the tactician gloomily before mentally preparing himself and starting to look through what was presented to him. "And you just…carry these around with you?"

"A good merchant always comes prepared. You never know when you'll come across a long term business partner."

"I guess I can't argue with that logic," Robin said as he looked through the contract. Gods, it was huge! And the print was positively miniscule! Whoever wrote this definitely hated humans; that was for sure. The contract was filled with clauses, sub clauses, complicated legal and business terms, and other unhelpful tidbits. Robin could feel his brain slowly melting and his eyes crossing. "Um, right. Well, I'll just assume this is all in order and sign on the dotted line, yeah?"

"Excellent! That's exactly what I was hoping for! Now then, please go to page-"

"Not so fast!" Cordelia interrupted.

"What's wrong?" Robin asked, somewhat surprised at her firm tone.

"Here," pointed the pegasus knight. "Page 214, line 55. It says that we are to buy products 'exclusively from Anna & Anna and affiliates.' It says here that if we breach this condition or even negotiate with other merchants, you have the right to terminate this contract with immediate effect and increase the price of your goods by at least one hundred percent or more depending on the deal negotiated with the rival merchant. Now, I don't really think that's very fair, do you?"

"It's a simple break clause from the contract. You know, insurance so we don't lose our customers and all that?" Anna said innocently.

Cordelia frowned. "Insurance, yes. But I think it's unreasonable that you can charge so much if we even so much as glance at the goods of other merchants. Considering that you have a monopoly on some products, your price increases put us at a considerable disadvantage. This clause will have to change."

"Alight, alright," Anna said grudgingly. "But you gotta give me something! I need to protect my business from wandering clients, you understand."

"Very well, how about this: we promise to buy exclusively from you. If buy form other merchants, we'll pay you the difference up front, plus interest after the war's over. How's that?"

Anna thought for a moment. "I…suppose that'll do. What's the interest rate?"

"Five percent."

"Twenty."

"Seven."

"Fifteen."

"Ten. Take it or leave it."

"…Deal."

As Anna was amending the document, Robin leaned in and whispered, "Wow, good catch!"

"Don't get excited just yet," Cordelia whispered back. "If my hunch is right, then this contract is going to be riddled with

these little traps. We're probably going to be here for the whole night."

"Aw man! Can't we just take her word for it and assume the rest is good?"

"Do you want to throw away the army's money?"

"No…"

"Then we stay up and comb through every word in this contract until it becomes acceptable to us."

Robin groaned and looked back as Anna finished re-writing the clauses.

"Right, done. Are you ready to sign?" asked the merchant hopefully.

"Not quite," responded Cordelia. "Let's look over here. It says that your company shall be exempt from all taxes in Ylissean territory as long as this contract is in effect. I think that…"

The next several hours were a blur of negotiating proposals, counter-proposals, more complicated legal terms, intense (and sometimes heated) arguing, haggling and other things. Robin helped out as much as he could, whenever he could. He knew Ylissean law, or some of it, at least. Granted, he wasn't an aspiring legal professional like Maribelle, but Robin knew enough obscure legal holes to wrangle Anna into submission. Of course, Cordelia was the real star of the negotiations as she actually did comb through every word in the many, many, many paged contract and weeded out every trap, fine text, loophole and possible pitfall. It was very late at night when all parties decided that the final contract was satisfactory. But then, everyone was also exhausted and wanted sleep it was agreed that the official signing would happen at a later day. Thus, the difficult negotiations ended and everyone departed for their tents (except Robin, whose tent the negotiations took place).

After they bid Anna goodnight, Robin pulled Cordelia aside and thanked her again for everything she'd done thus far.

"For the hundredth time, Robin. You don't need to thank me so many times!" the pegasus knight laughed wearily. "You've made your gratitude abundantly clear."

"I just want to make my appreciation shown," Robin said, equally wearily. "Especially after this, long, long talk. You were a real help today, you know that?"

"Just doing my duty as your faithful secretary."

"Cordelia, you should get a raise. Seriously. I feel that the standard Shepherd salary just doesn't cut it for all the work you do."

"Thank you for your generous offer, Robin. But I'm happy with what I have. It's enough for all my purposes."

"I insist. I'll talk to Chrom about taking you on full time. When you're not fighting, of course. Because, Cordelia? The way you handled today's talks was, well…It was very, very, hot."

Cordelia was too tired to get embarrassed at what she assumed was another one of Robin's jokes. Instead, she chuckled softly, shook her head, and bid him goodnight.

Robin was about to lie down and get a good night's sleep after a long day of work when he heard a light rapping on his tent. Wearily, he got up, opened the flap and saw the same person that he spent the past several hours negotiating with.

"Anna? What are you doing here? It's late!" complained the tactician.

"Just a few things, I swear!" responded the merchant before looking in Robin's tent. "Is your friend here?"

"No. She went to bed. As should you."

"I will, I will. But first, let me make you an offer you can't refuse!"

"Can't it wait? I'm tiiiiiiired."

"No, it can't. Here," the merchant entered Robin's tent and put two items on his desk.

Robin looked at them and yawned. "What're those?"

"A taste of what's to come. I have come here and brought you two very special items that I think you might be interested

in."

Robin yawned again. "And what makes you think that?"

"Well, on the table here I have brought to you an Arcfire tome…"

Robin immediately perked up.

"And a Levin Sword."

"What's that?"

"A magic sword that channels your magic powers and calls down the wrath of the gods. In the form of lighting. It has both the functionality of a sword and a thunder tome all in one! In slices, dices, stabs and shocks. Interested?"

Robin made a very poor attempt at a poker face.

"I thought so," Anna said smugly.

"Okay, how much?"

"Consider it as a signing gift. You'll have access to these weapons if you wish to purchase them in the future. As for these two, I can give them to you right here, right now, for the low, low, price of…" Anna proceeded to write a number on a spare piece of paper and presented it to Robin.

When he saw how much, the tactician frowned. "You do realize this is half our current overall military budget, right?"

"I know. But you just signed with the best supplier in the realm and should get the first shipments of weapons soon. Those are of the highest quality and should serve their purpose until you have more money to equip the rest of your troops. In the meanwhile, some of them will have to sit out while others fight with the best weaponry you can afford. More importantly, you can ride into battle and decimate you enemies with fire and lightning, with both tome and sword in hand. Doesn't that just sound," Anna came close and whispered in Robin's ear seductively. "Delicious?"

Yet again, Robin found himself in a conundrum. What would he do? Would be blow half the money they had on two toys for himself? Or would he be prudent and save to buy arms for everyone? What to do, what to do…

- One big decision later -

"BWARGH!"

Chrom grunted as he blocked the Risen's axe with Falchion. With great effort, he managed to push it away and swiftly cleaved it in two.

"Th-there seems to be more of them than usual!" the prince breathed. "Where did they all come from?"

"'Tis a question to ponder another day!" replied Frederick. "Be ready my lord, more enemies approach!"

Chrom nodded and took a fighting stance as he faced about five approaching Risen. This wasn't looking too good. He and Frederick where a formidable team, sure, but they have been fighting for a while and exhaustion was starting to take its toll. Something would need to happen soon, otherwise the Risen might just overwhelm them…

Just then, Robin emerged out of nowhere and jumped in between Chrom and the approaching Risen. He stuck out his hand and shouted, "Arcfire!"

A jet of flame immediately shot out of Robin's hand and incinerated the Risen in front of him.

Chrom's eyes widened at the intensity of the fire. He wasn't aware that they had such powerful tomes in their possession.

"Robin?!"

The tactician turned and smiled. "Hey Chrom! You alright?"

"Just peachy," deadpanned the prince. "How'd you do that? Where did you get that tome from?"

"Oh, this little thing? Funny story. I'll tell you later. Excuse me," Robin said as he turned to face more Risen. He then

unsheathed a very interesting looking sword.

"Robin?"

"As you know," the tactician responded while he was concentrating. "I can only use my tomes so many times until they expire…which is why I brought my Levin Sword!"

Robin shouted something before turning his sword in the direction of the Risen. Immediately, several bolts of lightning rained down from the skies and struck each Risen. As Robin flicked his wrist, the lightning bolts jumped from one Risen to another, "chaining" and electrocuting them. All the while, Robin was standing and "conducting" the lighting with his sword like a maestro at an opera. Eventually, there was nothing left of the Risen but ash.

"THAT'S RIGHT, YOU UNDEAD FOOLS! THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS TO THOSE WHO WOULD FACE ROBIN, GOD OF FIRE AND THUNDER! TREMBLE BEFORE ME AND DESPAIR!"

Chrom and Frederick could only watch as Robin shouted to no one in particular and laughed manically. Then, as soon as he started, Robin stopped, sheathed his sword, turned to his friends and smiled. "So, good battle today, huh?"

Neither of them could say anything as Anna chose than moment to run up to the tactician.

"Hey, champ!" the merchant said cheerily. "I saw your performance from over there. I take it you took your new toys for a spin, eh? Satisfied with what you got?"

"So very satisfied," Robin said with a contented sigh. "The tome burns things as well as one can possibly burn things and the sword works like a charm. It's positively…electrical."

Robin laughed at his pun. Anna did too, although it seemed much more forced.

"Alright! Another happy customer. I assume you're happy enough with your products to sign the contract from yesterday?"

"You bet. Just give me a pen and we're all set to go."

"Wonderful! I just so happen to have to the contract and pen on me here. So," Anna presented them both to Robin. "Just sign along the dotted line and we're officially in business."

"Not so fast!"

A new voice entered the conversation followed by a flap of wings. Everyone looked to see Cordelia dismounting her pegasus and approaching them.

"Darn it, not her…" Anna muttered under her breath.

"Cordelia? What's wrong? Why're you here?" asked Robin.

"I'm here to make sure that you're signing exactly what we agreed upon yesterday," replied the pegasus knight as she took the contract and eyed it carefully.

"Oh, come now! It definitely is the contract from yesterday!" insisted Robin. "We discussed it for hours, what could possibly have changed from then and-"

"The tax percentage is wrong."

"What?"

"Here," Cordelia pointed. "It says Anna & Anna receives an eighty percent tax break in Ylissean territory. We agreed on thirty percent."

Robin and Cordelia looked at Anna suspiciously.

"I-it's just simply a typo, honest mistake! The three and the eight look so similar that you can easily mistake them, ha ha ha…"

Cordelia frowned and pointed to a new page. "Here. It says the prices of goods will only be discounted if we spend more than the given amount. Yesterday, we agreed that our discount would be universal, regardless of how much we spend or what we buy."

"Oops, I simply forgot to amend that part of the document. It was late and we were all tired. It's an honest mistake!" Anna laughed nervously.

Cordelia signed. "Robin, it looks like we'll need to look over this whole thing again to see what other 'honest mistakes' this little weasel forgot to fix."

"That won't be necessary."

The pegasus knight looked to the tactician in surprise. "Robin?"

"I said we won't need to do that. We spent a whole lotta time looking over it yesterday. I think once is enough, don't you?"

"But, Robin..!"

"That's a very sensible course of action!" Anna said approvingly. "We don't want to waste more time on this. Let's just sign and be done with it all, yeah?"

"Of course," Robin smiled unsettlingly. "Because I trust you, Anna. I trust that you will be giving me the contract that we've negotiated yesterday. Free of any errors."

"Naturally! Now, just sign riiight here…"

"Because," Robin continued. "If there were any errors that you didn't fix, then we wouldn't be able to fight this war properly. And that would lead to some very desperate situations for us. And desperate situations lead to desperate solutions. Isn't that right?"

"Okay…" Anna was starting to get disturbed. It sounded like Robin was issuing a threat underneath that eerily calm and smiling exterior.

"For example, if we run out of arms because of some faulty contract work on *somebody's* part, then we would need… creative ways of procuring weapons and armor to fight out battles. Hell, we might even need to *nationalize* some companies in Ylisse and confiscate their goods in the name of the war."

Anna gasped in horror. "N-n-n-nationalize? That's the token forbidden word that every business woman dreads and hopes to never, ever, ever hear! It's the last resort of business hating, socialist tyrants! You can't! You wouldn't dare! You don't have the power!"

Robin continued smiling that unsettling smile of his. "I can. I would dare and I do have the power. But, that's a very drastic last resort that only hypothetically would happen if we find ourselves in a very bad position. And as our official supplier, it's your duty to supply us and ensure we don't find ourselves in a very bad position. Riiight?"

Anna gulped. "Th-that's right."

"So, let me ask you again: this is the contract that we negotiated yesterday, correct? With no little 'honest' mistakes hiding between the lines?"

"Err, well… The copy you're holding may…contain some minor errors. This," Anna fidgeted nervously before sighing in resignation and pulling another copy from her coat and handing it to Robin. "This is probably the right copy."

"You had our copy with you the whole time and yet still tried to cheat us?!" Cordelia asked indignantly.

Anna shrugged and smiled her trademark smile. "Hey, a girl's gotta make a living."

"That's true," said Robin. "And in that vein, you should know that, due to some unforeseen circumstances, Anna & Anna now offer us a discount of fifty percent on all their products."

"Fifty percent!?" cried Anna. "That's not what we agreed on!"

"Yes, well we agreed on very specific terms yesterday. Terms that you have tried to change today. I think it's only fair that you compensate us for this little trick, don't you?" asked Robin, before ominously adding, "Otherwise, we'll have to claim damages, take you to court and confiscate some of your goods as collateral. Do we want that?"

"…So fifty-fifty it is."

"I'm glad you think so too!" Robin smiled broadly and signed on the dotted line before handing the contract back to Anna and shaking her hand. "Congratulations! You're now the sole and official supplier of the Shepherds. We look forward to

doing business with you in the future!"

"Yeah…the future," Anna said less enthusiastically before muttering to herself. "I really hope this ends up being worth it!"

With Anna gone to get their first batch of new gear, Robin turned to Cordelia and gave a genuine, non-predatory smile. "I think that went rather well, don't you?"

"Wow, Robin. That was some smooth negotiating back there. I didn't think you had it in you!" Cordelia said approvingly.

"Something I remembered from Sumia's book club. *A Simpleton's Guide to Business Negotiations* the book was called. The theme of the month was self-help. Payed off like a charm, I'd say!"

"I'd say so too. Now that all that's settled, I think I'll go back and check up on our supplies and update our inventory. I'll have a full report to you by the end of the day."

"Thanks, Cordelia. Much appreciated."

After having waved goodbye to the pegasus knight and watching her fly away, Robin turned to his best friend and best friend's guardian who watched the conversation in silence.

"What?"

Chrom was first to speak. "What was that all about?"

"That? Business," Robin said simply. "You'll be glad to know that I've secured us a reliable provider of weapons and armor for a very reasonable price. The downside is that some of you will have to go without weapons for a while."

"What?"

"Not you, Chrom! Your weapon doesn't break. Lucky dastrard, you. And you too, Frederick," Robin said as he addressed the knight. "You're too valuable not to fight."

"Anything to help the haildom," Frederick said gruffly. "Oh, by the way. During the day's fighting, we came across a small cache of weapons probably belonging to a band of thieves. Here."

Frederick tossed a spear. Robin caught and inspected it. "Hm, steel. Not bad. Good quality and not too worn. Great job, Frederick! We can definitely use this. You say it was a small cache?"

"Yes, a few spears, swords and an axe."

"I love it when things look up."

And things were definitely looking up. New weapons, new supplier (with a good reputation, quality wise) new hyper-competent secretary, new fire tome and new sword of awesome. Now, they would get top of the line weapons and hopefully could put the days of using crappy bronze weapons behind them. The only thing that was left to do was decide who would fight and who would get the bench until the next payday and arms deliveries arrive. But that wasn't so bad. Besides, Robin could probably pick up the slack. From what little use he got out of them today, he already loved his new sword and tome. Armed with such weapons, he would shock/burn/hack anyone and anything that stood before him. And have fun, too! He would have to come up with a new name for the next level of tactics made available to him by his weapons. Something like…Shock and Awesome. Yeah.

Chapter 18: Gregor

Hello once again! I thank you for all the comments, favs and follows. Man, you guys gave me some great feedback. Yeah, I probably can't handle a giant harem fic here anyway. A project for another day, I guess. My heart wants to do so many things but my head tells me to stick to whatever plan I had before. I'm so conflicted! While I try to figure some things out, have some Gregor.

Also, a thank you to mileyzfan123 for beta-ing. Much appreciated.

Law. Order. Law and order. Those were two things that Robin put a lot of emphasis on (and not just the crime drama series of books that he and Sumia were reading). He liked to have law and order in his everyday life. Laws brought regulation and control. They were rules designed to improve the functioning of societies by telling people what they should and should not do. They were meant to instill a sense of right and wrong and enable those who were wronged to address their grievances through the relevant legal channels. When applied correctly, laws brought stability, certainty, and order. Order was paramount, as high in importance as law. Order was the opposite of chaos and disorder. Chaos and disorder were things that Robin absolutely despised. In his everyday life, Robin tried to live as a law abiding and orderly citizen. This extended to his work life. In order to avoid having a mess in his workspace, Robin came up with a system in which everything had a place where it should be and rigid rules concerning the sequence in which he should deal with the constant stream of reports that flooded his tent on a daily basis. This system was complicated, but it was fast, efficient and accurate. It also kept his tent in pristine condition. That was very important.

Outside his workstation, Robin also liked to have laws and rules to keep things together. That's why he came up with the whole idea of a contract for all new non-Shepherds. It outlined their duties, responsibilities, terms, conditions and penalties. It was always good to have things in writing. Hard evidence made wiggling out of your commitments harder (another thing Robin learned during self-help week at the book club). Having an order to life was good. Official procedures were good. They gave structure and straightforwardness.

Of course, despite Robin's obsessive need to keep things nice, neat, and orderly, he couldn't always have his way. He tried his best to keep track and categorize everything that happened and the new people that were recruited. But with all his efforts, there was always *someone* who thought it would be a good idea to do things his way. Ordinarily, that wouldn't be much of a problem because they would have no authority on important matters. But this was not an ordinary situation and not an ordinary someone. This someone just happened to be his best friend. His best friend who was also the leader of the Shepherds. As such, he had a lot of authority within their little group. And that meant that he could do things his way and get away with it. His way being a way that wasn't Robin's way. And Chrom's way drove Robin nuts in how impulsive and unstructured it was. But that was okay! Because all Robin had to do was drill into Chrom's head the proper procedures of doing things and hiring people…as long and often as was necessary.

"…And that concludes my two and a half hour lecture on the proper procedures in the situations discussed earlier. Now class," Robin turned. "Any questions?"

The 'class' (consisting solely of Chrom) sighed in relief. "Gods, I felt like time ground to a halt and my life was slowly draining from me. I-I saw a light and my parents, smiling at me…"

"Chrom? Hey, Chrom!"

"Huh? What?" Robin's voice seemed to break the prince out of whatever trance he found himself in. "Robin? Why are you here? What happened?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm here because this is my tent. And I *was* giving you another, more thorough lecture on the proper procedures for hiring new Shepherds, among other things."

"Oh…right. Gods. I was hoping that was a bad dream or something…"

"You *were* paying attention, right?" Robin asked suspiciously. "I'd hate it if the lecture went in one ear and out the other. That would mean that I'd have to start all over again. In more detail."

"What? No! No no no no! You don't have to do that!" Chrom said quickly. "I definitely paid attention during that entire whole session. Yep! I'm a changed man, Robin. All about the rules and procedures…and stuff. So please, no more lectures. Okay?"

"I really should give you a test to really make sure the lessons stuck…"

Gods no please spare me merciful Naga! Chrom didn't think he ever prayed for anything so hard before.

"Buuuut, I suppose I can trust you since you're my best friend and all."

Chrom sagged in relief. "Oh thank Naga…"

"Don't look too relieved, I do this for your own good you know."

"And here I thought it was because you liked the sound of your own voice."

"My voice *is* pretty great. But that's not why I lecture you for hours on end, Chrom. I do it because I care. And it's my job. It's my job to care. Proper procedures are very important to the functioning of anything."

"Right…" Chrom rolled his eyes. "You know, for encouraging everyone to be friendly and informal with each other, you sure are a sticker for rules."

"Well, yeah. On an everyday basis, communication between friends and colleagues should be nice and informal. It encourages friendliness and familiarity. BUT! It's a totally different matter when it comes to written documents. For written documents, everything must be recorded, copies made and done by the book. Exactly by the book!"

Chrom stepped back at Robin's sudden outburst. "Ooookay, I see you're very passionate about that. Care to tell me why?"

"Because written documents are the only things available to you when bad things happen. Like crooks. You make a verbal deal with them and when it comes down to it, they say the agreement wasn't worth jack because there was no evidence. It might as well not have existed!"

"Uh…"

"Or you could take the shortcut and skip a few steps to hire someone," continued the tactician. "And then the courts come after you because of a few technicalities and because you didn't follow 'proper, official' procedures. Then your jealous, corrupt colleagues who have connections in high places undo everything you've ever done and you're left with nothing! All because you didn't file the correct paperwork and follow the necessary procedures to the letter!"

"Robin?"

"Yes?"

"How do you come up with such…colorful scenarios?"

"…It was criminal legal drama week at the book club."

"Ah," Chrom smiled and nodded in understanding. "That makes sense."

"Hey! Just because those stories where fiction that may or may not have been inspired by true events doesn't mean you should just dismiss the lessons that you can take away!" Robin warned somewhat hysterically. "If you know even half the things these crooks pulled and got away with, you'd be thanking me for my clearly justified precautions. And the worst part is that the shady crap they pull is legal! Borderline, but still legal!"

"Well, you always have our well-being at heart. It's the thought that matters?"

"You may laugh now, but when crooks try to come after your holdings/business/savings or whatever, everything will be contractually airtight. Then you'll thank me for all my diligent work. Oh, by the way, I need a favor. What're you doing tomorrow evening?"

"Why? Are you going to lecture me again?"

"No."

"Then I'm free as a bird. What's up?"

"Okay, Chrom? I need to ask you as a friend to do something very, very important for me. A task that I can only trust you with."

"Of course. Anything. Just name it."

"I need you…"

"Yes?"

"To accompany me to my weekly book club meeting."

Chrom blinked. "You're…joking, right?"

"Not in the slightest," Robin said seriously. "This is a serious and very important thing that I need you to do for me. It is of the utmost importance. You'll be there, right?"

"Robin, come on! What can possibly be so important that you need to drag me to your book club?"

"It is something that threatens the very existence of me! And I need *you* to help me stop it."

"Can't you get someone else to stand in for me?"

"You don't think I've tried? I've asked every male Shepherd around and none of them qualify! Frederick is too busy being the tough taskmaster and doing whatever around camp, Virion would probably only contribute to the problem, Vaike isn't into the books, Stahl's more interested in the snacks, Gaius only the desserts and Lon'qu barely keeps it together with Lissa. I don't think I can get him in a room with two women long enough to actually read and discuss books before he up and bolts. So that just leaves you!"

"Wait…I was your last resort? I thought you said this was a task that you could only trust me with."

"Chrom, you're our leader and have other duties around camp. I didn't want to ask you because you'd think this was super trivial and have better things to do with your time. But since there aren't any options, here I am."

Chrom sighed. "Well, I suppose that makes sense. Now, before I agree to anything, what is this problem of yours and why do you need a male Shepherd with you?"

"Well, you see. When Sumia and I started our little book club, we decided that it would be a democratically run institution. Meaning that each member got to voice what materials we would be reading, the theme and topic of discussion. When it was just us two, that system worked flawlessly. We would put forward suggestions and alternate each week."

"Sounds good so far. What changed?"

"We added Cordelia, and then everything changed…" Robin shook his head. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. She was my very able secretary and Sumia's friend. Sounds like a perfect addition to the club, right? Ha ha, WRONG! Because when Cordelia came, she ruined everything! Our perfect democratic system of topic choosing was ruined forever! Now, we have three members. You know what that means?"

"Well-"

"It means we have an odd number of members. One more than two. Three. And three is the opposite of an even number. That means that someone will be outnumbered in the voting process. And since Sumia and Cordelia's tastes are more alike than any of mine, they dominated the voting process and practically dictated what we would be reading. Do you know what that means?"

"You…don't get to choose what to read?" Chrom ventured.

"That's right!" exclaimed Robin as he began pacing. "Before, I at least got what I wanted to read every other week. At worst, Sumia and I made compromises. Now, I've got nothing. Nothing! And you know what they got! Everything! And the result of that is romance week."

"Is that really so bad? Didn't you say you guys had criminal legal drama week recently?"

"That was three weeks ago. And after that was a straight three weeks of romance week. A continuous time of reading various lovey dovey love novels of varying levels of trashiness. And after such a prolonged period of exposure to crappy romance novels, I'm starting to…to…" Robin shuddered. "Care."

"To care about what?"

"To care about…things and…feelings. To care about certain characters and their relationships with each other. To care if Eliza Benedict will marry the rich yet aloof noble gentleman Mr. Darsee and whether her good natured sister Joan will make her feelings known to Darsee's more extroverted friend Mr. Brimley and-ARGH! You see? You see?! It's already happening! I'm caring about characters and feelings and romantic relationships!" Robin cried out in panic as he grabbed

Chrom by the collar and started violently shaking him. "Help me, Chrom! Before it's too late!"

"Robin! Get a hold of yourself!" Chrom cried and slapped his friend across the face.

That seemed to do the trick as Robin took a few breaths and calmed down. "Thanks, Chrom. I needed that."

"No problem," replied the prince as he fixed his shirt. "Now, if it means that much to you, I'll attend your book club meetings and vote in your favor."

Robin sighed in relief. "Gods, Chrom. You have no idea how much that means to me."

"But, why can't you just tell Sumia and Cordelia how you feel? I'm sure they'll understand."

"Oh no. I'm not going to be the one who destroys the sanctity of our democratic system because I don't like what we're reading. How selfish would that be?"

"Not very. Come on, they're your friends. If you would just tell them how you feel-"

"Absolutely not. We have a good thing going here and I'm not going to ruin it by, you know, telling the truth."

"Uh…huh. Alright then, let me ask you something else. Why are you so worried about getting invested in the characters in the novels you read?"

"Because that leads to caring about their relationships and who they end up with and love and many emotions on my part. Being a tactician, those are very dangerous things for me."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a tactician; I don't get complicated feelings and emotions! My job is to analyze battle scenarios and make sure we win and everyone on our side comes out alive, not to daydream about the fictional romantic lives of fictional characters. That's the beginning of a very dangerous slope."

"I'm really not seeing how."

"It's simple. Once I open the floodgates of caring about the relationships of fictional characters in novels, where does it end? Next thing you know, all that saturation in cheesy romance novels will affect me in real life and I'll start caring about the real relationships of real people. That means all of you! And at that point, my novel life will start negatively interfering with my professional life."

"How?"

"Because there'll be a conflict between what I know I must do, and what I think is romantically best. For example: you usually work best when fighting with either myself or Frederick. But alternate romance novel me might think, 'Chrom is the prince. He's also single. You know what the stereotypical romance novel pairing is for the single prince? The pegasus knight. Hm, which one of our two candidates do I think would look cute alongside our prince?' Now, tell me what was wrong with that scenario."

"Well, I-"

"I'll tell you what. Firstly, alternate romance novel me noted that you're single. And you're the prince. You're the single prince. That's the most popular character that the heroines hooked up with in the books that I have read. Now, real world me wouldn't really care about any of those things. Because why would I? To me, you're simply my best warrior friend Chrom. That's it. Period. Secondly, the first thing alternate romance novel me thought of was who would look 'cute' alongside you as a partner in the romantic sense. Again, why the hell would I care about that? The only time I think about who would look good together is in battle. And looking good only in a combat sense, which the other me did not take into account at all. What the other me did was put his preferences and romantic clichés over tactical sense. And you know what that leads to? Everyone being dead because they weren't fighting with their most fitting battle partner, that's what!" Robin took a deep breath. "Now, I hope you understand the severity of the situation."

"That's…quite the logic chain. You sure have given this lots of thought, haven't you?"

"Yes. Yes I have. You see, the very survival of the Shepherds is at stake! I'm glad you decided to step in and save us all. If I spent any more time submerged in romance novels, I think I would go crazy. It's like indoctrination, except with romance novels instead of ideological lectures."

Chrom chuckled. "When you paint such a grim picture, how can I not help you out?"

"Good. Great. I'll tell you when our next meeting is later on. Just remember to back me up no matter what I say, alright?"

"Sure thing."

"Alright. Now let's change the subject before we start talking about one true love and how there's one special person in the world for everyone or something."

"Do you not believe that?" Chrom asked curiously.

"No. Why? Do you?"

"Well, yes, actually. I find it gives you hope that you can find someone special and that they exist. It's better than believing that there's no one and you may die alone."

"Really? You believe in that whole soulmate stuff? Really? You?" Robin asked incredulously.

"Yes. Is it really that surprising?"

"It is, actually. So you believe that there is a special someone for everyone and that when you two meet, you'll feel the spark of love and instinctively know that she's the one for you?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it so dramatically, but yes. I do."

Robin remained quiet before a smile spread across his face. "Why Chrom, I didn't know you were such a romantic!"

"It's actually my deepest, darkest secret," joked Chrom. "Don't tell anyone."

"Your secret is safe with me. Just, you know, warn me when you meet your significant other. I need to prepare before you do something impulsive like, I don't know, marrying her immediately after your first meeting or something."

"Robin, at least give me *some* credit. I may be a romantic, but I'm not crazy."

"Right, right. That's my area of expertise!" laughed Robin. "Anyway, I'd love to continue chatting but I'm sure you have things to do, as do I."

"Indeed. It's always nice talking with you, Robin. Just tell me when and where you guys are meeting and I'll be there to support you."

"Will do. And remember everything you've learned today. I hope this is the last time I'll have to lecture you on proper procedures."

"Oh, that. Right. Of course. After today, I'll be sure to do everything you told me to do. By the books and everything. After today. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have things to do and stuff. Bye!"

Before Robin could say anything, Chrom quickly made his way out of his tent. The tactician furrowed his brows. "If I didn't know better, I'd say he was trying to get away from me. Oh well, whatever. Duty calls."

But before he could get anything done, someone barged into his tent.

"Robin, there you are! How's my favorite customer doing?"

"Anna," Robin replied curtly. "Don't you ever knock?"

"Bah. A good merchant knows that the key to any sale is to catch her customer by surprise."

"You might say the same thing about predators and prey."

"Same thing. I mean…what?"

Robin sighed. It was way too early to be dealing with this. "What do you want, Anna?"

"Isn't it obvious? I have a product with me that I think you'll be very interested in."

"Really? Well before you go off and try to sell me anything, we'll have to wait until my secretary arrives. She usually deals with face-to-face business transactions."

Anna shook her head. "No can do, Robin."

"What? Why?"

"Because I have a time limited offer for you. That, and your secretary is otherwise preoccupied."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I sent her away."

"You what?"

Anna smiled innocently. "What can I say? A merchant always comes prepared and removes all obstacles to clinch the sale."

Robin narrowed his eyes. "That's *exactly* what a predator would say."

"Oh yeah? Would a predator also come offering…" Anna reached down and took something out of her bag. "THIS?"

"What am I looking at?"

"This," Anna put down a set of rectangular boxes on Robin's desk. "Is the complete collection of the *Risk/Reward* strategy series of board games."

"Oh?" Robin leaned in and looked in interest. "Tell me more."

"I knew you'd be interested. Well, *Risk/Reward* is a series of board games that are notorious for their sheer number of rules, complexities and duration of matches. However, if you get past all that, there's a deep level of depth and strategy. Although it isn't for everyone, I figured that a tactician such as yourself would appreciate the finer details required to play the game."

"Well, this is definitely right up my alley. And look at the details on the board and the figurines."

"Well spotted! This compilation especially has been lovingly crafted by some of the most talented artisans to portray characters and classes with loving detail. Look, you can see every scale on the wyverns, the pegasi all have detailed feathers and the craftsmanship on the armor of the knights is simply top quality."

"Indeed."

"And this entire collection is themed on different worlds and legends! Here, you have the Tellius board, and the Elibe board, Jugdral, Magvel and many more!"

"What's the difference?"

"Besides unique units? Terrain and all associated bonuses and factions."

"Woah, there are terrain bonuses and different factions? Factions that all play differently?"

"That, and much, much more! I told you, this series has layers upon layers of strategic depth."

"Well…" Robin was clearly interested. Despite this probably being all part of her saleswoman pitch, everything Anna said was true. The map was very detailed, the figures were lovingly made and the whole game looked like one big tactical simulation all on one board. The thought of setting it all up and playing did make Robin feel giddy inside. But before that, there was one unpleasant detail to deal with. "Alright, you got me. Anna, how much?"

The merchant smiled brightly. "Usually, something like this would cost you a pretty penny. But, since you're turning out to be my best customer, I think I'll give you a discount. This whole series is yours for…" Anna wrote down a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Robin. "This much."

"R-really?!" Robin asked incredulously. "Wow! That's actually reasonable and something I can feel not guilty about. And here I thought you would charge me some stupidly high amount."

"Hey, I may be a merchant, but I'm not unreasonable."

"Thankfully not. Here," Robin took out his pouch of gold and handed Anna a handful of coins. "Thanks again, Anna. This should keep me busy and improve my tactical skills. All for a very reasonable price."

"All in a day's work," Anna took the coins and put them in her pouch. "Now, is there anything else you need?"

"Yeah. What are the rules for these games? Is there a rule book or something?"

"I'm glad you asked! There is a rule book detailing every bit of info you'll ever need about the *Risk/Reward* games. And that book is…urgh…!" Anna reached down and barely managed to drop a big and heavy looking book on Robin's desk. "Whew! Well, there it is!"

Robin stared. "You're kidding me."

"Nope. That's it. The official updated rule book of the *Risk/Reward* series."

"How many rules are there?! This book is bigger than most encyclopedias!"

"I told you, this game is complicated. Almost ridiculously so."

"Oh boy…" Robin sighed. "This is some beefy rule book. How much?"

"I'm glad you asked! For you, I'll sell the book for…" Anna wrote down another number. "This much."

"ARGH!" Robin felt like he was going to have a heart attack. "What the hell, Anna?! This costs three times as much as the entire collection!"

"Well hey, did you see the size of that thing? Besides, it comes with a bunch of lovingly drawn illustrations and stuff. Surely that's worth the extra coin?"

"It's absolutely *not* worth the extra coin!" cried Robin. "How can you even think of charging this much?! I thought we were friends!"

"We are. But a girl has to make a living."

"Anna, we've been buying in bulk directly and solely from you. You could make three livings with the money we've spent."

"And it's all very appreciated! However, this is the only rule book in stock and I have to price it accordingly."

"Gods. Didn't we have a discount on this stuff?"

"Sorry hon, but your discount only covers war related goods. This is strictly leisure."

"What? That can't be right. Let me see our contract."

"Sure thing," Anna reached into her pocket and took out the aforementioned contract. "See for yourself."

And sure enough, there it was. In the title, it said that this was a contract covering any and all war related goods. War. Related. It was even in big, bold letters.

"Well…At least our equipment is reasonably priced…" Robin mumbled to try and make himself feel better.

"It sure is. And taking quite a bit out of my potential profits. But I'm willing to look past that and still come to you advertising things I think you may find interesting. Like this game, for example."

"…"

"Aw, don't be like that!" Anna came around and put a comforting arm around the tactician's shoulder. "I see how much you want it. I know you want it. And you already got the entire collection! Why not spend a few more coins and be the best tactician that you can be?"

"Anna, this is way more than 'a few coins' on a stupid rule book."

"But just think about how much you'll improve your tactical prowess. This series is the game that all tacticians play. All of them. Even the terrible ones. That's how they improve."

Robin was probably the worst customer in the world. Or the best, depending on perspective. And that was because, no matter how much he knew that Anna pitching and exaggerating her products, he still fell for whatever she was selling him. It helped that her products were at least high quality and relevant to Robin's interests. What didn't help was that Robin had a very poor poker face and was thus easier to read than an open book. That's exactly why Robin always had

Cordelia at his side when dealing with the sneaky merchant. Cordelia negotiated hard and kept his wants in check. But when she wasn't present, his dealings with Anna always ended one way.

Robin decided to stop delaying the inevitable and get it over with quickly. He slowly and painfully reached for his coin pouch. "Argh! Giving…all my money at once…too…painful. Here. Take it. Take it now before I keel over!"

"Happy to oblige!" Anna quickly took Robin's gold. "A pleasure doing business with you, Robin. May our fruitful relationship continue for years to come!" she called as she waltzed out of his tent.

Robin just grumbled. That damn merchant was definitely going to drive him into an early grave with all the money she continuously managed to squeeze out of him. And despite his best efforts, she kept on doing it! That's it. Robin resolved to have Cordelia keep an eye on the merchant at all times. And Anna made her way to his tent, Cordelia will have to beat her there. It's the only way to keep himself from constantly spending his monthly wages on her stuff. Well, at least the not awesome stuff. And the Arcfire tome and Levin Sword combo definitely qualified as awesome stuff. No regrets there. They were worth every gold piece.

Robin sighed. No use fretting over spent gold now. Now, he was the proud owner of the entire themed *Risk/Reward* series and their stupid rule book. And he supposed the series *was* only for the strategically minded. It said so right on the boxes. That had to make it true, right?

"Yoo-hoo! Anyone in tent?"

"Yes, someone is in tent. Come in if you must."

When Robin looked up to see who it was, he saw an older man in some interesting getup enter his tent.

The man looked around before remarking, "Oy, tent is nothing like what Gregor expected. Is so neat and tidy! Even piles of paper look like they make neat rows. Is impressive."

"Uh, thanks? Gotta say, that's a very strange observation to be making to someone who you've never seen before."

"Oh, Gregor is sorry! Is just that Gregor has seen so many workplaces during his long life. All were big mess. Is nice to see how clean tent is. Is good sign of future employer that area where he work is so neat."

"Oh, well. Thanks again. I-" Robin paused. "Wait, 'future employer'? Who are you and what are you talking about?"

"Oh, Gregor is being sorry twice now! Where are manners?" The man who was probably named Gregor cleared his throat. "Hello dear employer of prospectiveness! Gregor here is name and mercenary work is game. Game Gregor is very good at."

"Riiight…So you're Gregor. Your occupation is a mercenary."

"Yes."

"And I'm guessing you're here because you're looking for work and we happen to be the best fighting force around, yes?"

"Is all sounding correct to Gregor."

"Well, as much as I'd love to hire…a complete stranger who just happens to come into my tent out of nowhere and who fights for the highest bidder, I'm afraid that the Shepherds don't currently have any openings for foreign contract fighters."

"Oy, is not what Gregor has heard."

"Oh? Pray tell, what has Gregor heard?"

"Gregor heard that Shepherds are needing all the help in fighting Plegian army. Gregor also heard that he is being hired by leader of Shepherds."

"Hired by the leader…? Oh for the love of-!" Robin took a deep breath to calm himself. "Gregor, is there any way that this guy was some sort of bandit pretending to be our leader?"

"Gregor hope not. Leader was very authoritative looking. Had blue hair and fancy sword at hip and cape that bellows in wind all heroic like."

"I was afraid of that…" Robin groaned. "So, he just…hired you just like that?"

"Yes."

"And he didn't ask how much you cost? What are your skills or strengths? Anything at all?"

"No. He probably see how honest and talented Gregor is and thinking Gregor would make good addition to army."

"Of course he did. Because *any* wandering mercenary is totally trustworthy! Why even bother checking them? He's probably legit. Better just take him on and let Robin handle everything else, as usual!" Robin grumbled to himself before clearing his throat. "Okay, fine. Looks like you're already hired. Of course, I can totally reverse this decision, but I can at least look at your case. I'm guessing you're also here to get directions from the resident tactician, correct?"

"Is correct. Gregor also told that paperwork is involved in recruitment process?"

"Yes, but more on that later. For now, I need to know more about you, your skills and what you're capable of. You said you're a merc, right? That means you probably saw a bunch of action. And I assume you've been in action for a while."

"Is all true. Gregor is best mercenary in business. Is as good as they come" Gregor said proudly. "And Gregor has been in business for long time. Has seen action in many places, killed many people and undertook many dangerous jobs. Gregor has wealth of experience and skill to offer Shepherds though many years of mercenary jobs doing."

"Hmm, I guess those are some very convincing arguments…" Robin looked down at his roster. "And I suppose we could use a mercenary. Besides Chrom and myself, the only other sword wielding foot soldier we have is Lon'qu. And he makes me scared. Scared because he has almost nothing to defend himself with. He dodges like a pro, sure. But I'm afraid that he'll get killed real bad if one of the many hits directed at him actually hits. I guess we have Gaius too, but he's more into sneaking than fighting. Sneaking is the opposite of fighting so Gaius is out. Looking at you, that shouldn't be a problem. You can take hits before keeling over, right?"

"Oh ho! Very right!" Gregor said jovially. "Gregor may be good mercenary, but Gregor not get that way without taking hits during long career. But Robin need not be afraid for Gregor's sake. Gregor big and hardy man with endurance, stamina and shield. Gregor can take much punishment before Gregor fall over like big sack of potatoes."

"Good, good. This is all very good. Having another swordsman on our team. And I suppose you can teach our younger members some stuff about how not to die."

"Indeedings! Gregor is master of teachings and passing hard earned wisdom to younger students. Will be good for overall army, yes?"

"Yes, anything to improve our survivability. Now, as a mercenary, you've probably worked for a bunch of people. I don't suppose you have any references with you?"

"Gregor always carries references to show how reliable he is. Gregor is giving them for you to see for yourself."

Robin stared with his mouth agape.

"What is problem?" Gregor asked, holding quite a sizable pile of papers. "Did Robin change mind about seeing praise for Gregor's work?"

"What? No. I'm just surprised you actually have references. On you. Like, available right now. I usually get confused looks or have to send letters to the capital for actual references."

"See? Is another sign of Gregor's reliability! Gregor carries his references on him in case new employers want proof of Gregor's abilities. Is good, no?"

"Is very good," Robin said approvingly as he took Gregor's papers. Their crumpled condition made them hard to make out. "Now, your references are all from…*Mercs R Us* and…*Merc Advisor*?"

"Is two biggest private companies for private contractors like Gregor. Very reliable. Many people go there and look for best mercenaries. All reviews of Gregor are from real people Gregor has done work for."

"Huh. This is news to me. Well, let's see what we have. 'Best merc to date. 10/10 would hire again.' 'Fast, reliable and you get your money's worth.' 'A little rough around the edges, but gets the job done fast and good.' 'Very happy with services rendered. He's pricey, but worth every coin.' Wow. Not bad."

"See? Gregor was even voted most reliable mercenary five months in row. Is proof enough of Gregor's abilities, no?"

"I suppose…" Robin mused.

Gregor certainly looked the part of the rugged mercenary. The fact that he was still in the business at his age and not dead in some ditch really did speak for his skill. Either that, or he got really lucky lots. But Robin doubted that someone can maintain such high luck for so long. So Gregor had skill and experience. If these reviews were to be believed, then he was also very good. The only negative reviews Robin saw were from people with really shady names or organizations that Robin read unflattering things about. Some of the things they said implied that Gregor underperformed when working for them, if he took their jobs in the first place. But that was fair enough. From what he read, some of those people were kinda terrible. Robin even recognized the names of some organizations that had very questionable businesses. When your positive reviews included organizations named Naga's Charity for the Unfortunate and bad reviews came from people named The Dread Pirate Crimsonbeard, that spoke volumes about your character. So, Gregor had integrity. Gregor had skill, experience and talent. And Robin could always use more unmounted soldiers wielding swords…

"So, Robin. Gregor sees that you are thinking very hard about hiring Gregor. Gregor is hoping that he has made a strong argument for himself, yes? Shepherds seem like good people with very pretty ladies. Gregor is very much hoping to work for you."

"Fine, fine. Everything looks good so far. I guess we can find some work for you here. I'll need to see you in action and what you're capable of before deciding on where to put you on a more permanent basis."

"Ho ho ho! Is very happy day for Gregor! Gregor promises that he'll be very useful to Shepherds. Gregor will be top soldier in no time, is promise!"

"Whoa, hey! Hold on there. Still is still a trial period for you. It can go either way, depending on stuff. Besides, we still have to talk about your terms and price."

"Is no problem. Little details that can be talked about later. Now, we celebrate!" Gregor said merrily as he took out a bottle of clear liquid and small glasses from the various pockets in his belt.

"Um, what're you doing?"

"Gregor is getting out celebratory drinks. Where Gregor is from, is tradition to drink after happy events in life. Gregor working for Shepherds counts as happy event. So here," Gregor filled both glasses. "Let us be drinking to newfound relationship!"

"Uh, sure. Why not?" Robin took the ridiculously small glass and smelled the liquid inside. As soon as the smell hit his nostrils, he immediately recoiled. "Woah, damn! What the hell is this stuff?! It assaulted my nose harder than a rabid wyvern!"

"Ho ho, is special traditional drink from Gregor's home country. Gregor also added few things to give it extra kick!"

"Yeah, well I don't think I can drink this thing," Robin said as he put his glass down on the table. "It seems waaay too intense for me by the smell alone."

"Robin, do not be like cat who is scared. Especially of innocent drink. And there is reason why glasses Gregor gave are so small. Proper way to drink special drink is to down it all in one go. Take shot from shot glasses, all quick and easy like."

"I don't know," Robin eyed his glass suspiciously. "It seems pretty strong…"

"Robin, is tradition in Gregor's home country. Please do not be ignoring important tradition and be sharing with the merriment of Gregor's employment. At least one glass? For Gregor?"

"…Fine," Robin finally said as he took his glass. "Let it be known that Robin doesn't back away from challenges and trying new things, no matter how dangerous they may or may not be."

"That is spirit! Now, bottoms be upping!"

"Yeah. Sure."

Robin took a deep breath and braced himself. This was probably going to be something seriously strong if the smell almost knocked him out. Oh well. The least he could do is respect traditions. So, Robin closed his eyes and quickly downed the contents of his shot glass.

In hindsight, that was probably a very bad idea. His eyes watered, this throat burned and he felt like he swallowed a glass full of bitterness in liquid form. Downing this thing was clearly a mistake. Yet, as Robin hacked and coughed, he felt that the taste did resemble something he drank some time ago…

"ACK! Damn! Gregor, what the hell was this?!" Robin managed to say between hacking and coughing. "Are you trying to kill me or something?! I feel like I just drank a glass full of acid!"

"Oy, is very bad that Robin is having such reactions from Gregor's simple brew!" Gregor came over and patted the tactician on the back. "Is Robin not used to drinking alcohol?"

"Oh, I've drunk alcohol! I know how that tastes. And whatever you gave me is definitely *not* alcohol!"

"Is not true. Gregor's special drink is most pure alcohol. More than even in most bars. Maybe Robin just not used to drinking so much?"

Robin finished coughing and unsteadily stood up. "Damn that was strong. And I totally have drunk alcohol before. Resulted in some real bad things happening that I can't even remember. In any case, the stuff I drank was strong, but it was also mixed with stuff. I know that I haven't drunk stuff like this straight…I think."

"Oh? Robin is liking drinks more like cocktails? Fear not, Gregor has you covered!"

The tactician watched curiously as Gregor took out more small bottles from his pockets (how many did he have and how did he manage to keep them all in his small belt?), put them on the desk and started mixing them. He even got out a normal sized glass to pour his new mixture into.

"There, Gregor make something that Robin will find more to his liking."

"Gregor, your drink almost killed me and it was a tiny shot glass. What makes you think that a bigger portion won't finish the job?"

"Is because Gregor has distilled alcohol with drinks that are not alcohol!" the mercenary explained cheerfully. "Taste is less good because drink is less pure, but should be something to Robin's liking. Robin try it, yes?"

The tactician frowned and looked at the glass. All his senses told him to just walk away and find something normal to drink. However, his throat still burned and the new drink Gregor concocted looked strangely refreshing. Somehow, whatever Robin drank actually made him thirstier. Well, sometimes poor decisions just had to be made because of… circumstances. Robin was sure that it wouldn't kill him. Probably.

Steeling himself yet again, Robin took the glass offered to him and drank it more slowly. And this time, the drink was actually pretty good! Robin could still taste the bitterness, but at least it was tempered by whatever Gregor added. It was sweet. Juice maybe?

"Robin is drinking and not all choking!" Gregor nodded in satisfaction. "Means Robin is enjoying new drink Gregor gave, yes?"

"Mmm," Robin finished the drink at put the glass down. "Yeah. That was actually pretty good. Very refreshing. Can you make me another?"

"Oh ho! Robin is coming around to Gregor's special brew! Be fearing not, for Gregor always prepared to share."

As Gregor was mixing up another drink, someone barged into the tent."

"Bubbles, I have some things to discuss with you."

"Gaius, how many times to I have to tell you that I'm not letting you back into the book club?"

"Aw, come on! I'll do better. I promise!"

"That's what you said last time. And the time before that. And the time before that. And each time, not only didn't you *not* read the material, but you also went off and ate the pies!"

"To be fair, they were really, really good. How could I not eat them?" asked Gaius cheekily.

"I know how good the pies are. Wait, no I don't. You know why? Because YOU kept on eating them! We're a book club, Gaius. We're not a taste testing bakery. And you could've at least left some for me!"

"Aw, don't be like that! Come on, Bubbles!" Gaius got to his knees and begged. "Please let me come back and taste some more of those delicious pi-er, books. I'm all about the reading and stuff."

"Really?" Robin asked sarcastically.

"I am. I totally am!"

"Well, when you put it that way…"

"Yes? Yes?!"

"No."

"Aw, come on! Please?"

"No."

"Pleeeease?"

"No."

"Bubbles, I thought we were friends. Cut me some slack here!"

"Gaius, if you were my friend, you could at least have left me some pie. Or better yet, not eaten the whole thing in the first place! You know how seriously I take my pies. Doubly so when they're baked by Sumia."

"So…you're not letting me back in?"

"No pie for you! Wait until dinnertime and maybe you'll get some."

"But dinnertime's so still hours away!" complained Gaius. "And Stumbles doesn't always bake for us. What if there's no pie today?"

"Well, then go off and eat some of your candy. I'm sure you have more than enough."

"But it's not the same…"

"I feel your pain…" Robin said sympathetically. "Sumia's pies are out of this world. But dem's the rules. And you're still not getting in."

"Fine…" Gaius sighed in defeat. "I guess I'll go and chew on a lollipop or something."

"That's the spirit. Oh, Gaius? Meet Gregor. He's our newest recruit. Gregor, Gaius."

"Pleasing to be meeting fellow Shepherd," Gregor stood up and shook the thief's hand. "Gregor looking forward to working with you."

"Likewise, I-" Gaius started to say before seeing something and turning to face Robin. "Bubbles, what's all this about?"

"Huh?" The question caught Robin off guard. "What's the meaning of what?"

"This!" Gaius pointed to Robin's table. "Bottles of alcohol and glasses. How could you start the party without your buddy Gaius?"

"Oh, that. Well, it sort of happened. I hired Gregor and the next thing I know is that he's busting out bottles and making drinks."

"Well ain't that sweet? You guys have room for one more?"

"Why not?" Robin turned to Gregor. "Any objections?"

"More people means more merrymaking!" Gregor replied jovially. "Let Gregor be giving you glass. How you like to have Gregor's drink? Straight or with mixing?"

"Unlike our lightweight friend here, I'll take my drink straight up. As strong as it gets."

"Hey, I take offense at that statement!" Robin said indignantly. "I'm no lightweight!"

"Come on, Bubbles. Do you remember what happened last time?" Gaius asked pointedly.

"Well hey, I was drinking before you got there."

"You were drinking cocktails. Probably not even very alcoholic ones."

"My cocktails had like, three different types of alcohol."

"Eh. Still mixed with nonalcoholic drinks and so still not straight up. But that's alright. You'll just be our junior partner in this."

"Oh yeah? We'll see about that. Gregor!" Robin turned to the mercenary. "Forget about before. Give me whatever you've got in a shot glass. I have a point to prove."

"Is Robin sure?" Gregor asked cautiously. "Robin is not liking drink straight up last time. Almost fall over in pain."

"Bubbles, you don't have to prove anything."

"Like hell I don't! Gregor, gimme the good stuff!"

"If Robin is sure, then Gregor shall oblige."

Once he had a full shot glass, Robin smirked at Gaius. "Just watch. After this, you'll be the one who's going to be drunk under the table and I'll be the one left standing."

Gaius just shrugged nonchalantly. "Whatever you say, Bubbles. Just don't blame me if this ends poorly."

"Drinking with trusted comrades cannot end poorly!" Gregor laughed. "Now, let us be drinking to new partnership!"

"Bottoms up."

"Cheers."

– Many shots later –

"….Many brave men will testify to Gregor's skill with blade. Is too bad all are being dead! Ho ho ho! Oh, Gregor love that joke."

"Pfft, ha ha ha!" Robin laughed drunkenly. "That's a gooood one, Gregs!"

"I dun gettit," Gaius slurred. "Was so funny?"

"Is funny because Gregor's good. A-and everyone who's as good is dead!" Robin explained before laughing again. "Ain't it funny?!"

"Oh….I gettit now. Hey, that *is* pretty funny!"

"I know!" Robin downed another shot. "Hilarious!"

"Gregor is happy that new friends find jokes to be so funny. Is always nice to share happy moments with new friends."

"You're damn right, Bottles! Friends're good. To friends!" Gaius grabbed the nearest shot glass and downed it.

"Friends *are* good," Robin nodded sagely. "Oh! You know what friends do? Play games…with alcohol! And drinking! Drinking games! We should tooootally play a drinking game."

"Bubbles. That a bad idea."

"What? Why?"

"You don remember what happened last time we tried playing a drinking game?"

"When did this happen?"

"I dunno. Sometime today? We tried taking shots every time Bottles here said his name."

"…We did?"

"Yeah. And we got smashed in like, five minutes. I think someone even threw up?"

"…I don't remember that at all."

"But Gregor remembers. Was fun game while it was lasting. Gaius and Robin can drink like best of them."

"Aw, thanks Gregor! You're pretty swell!" Robin waved his hand before turning to Gaius and smiling victoriously. "Ha! Hear that, Gaius? Robin drinks like the best of them!"

Gaius responded by grunting and downing another shot.

"Gregor is sellsword who swings swell sword. Ho ho ho! Another joke."

Robin burst into drunken laughter yet again.

Gaius stared dumbly. "I dun gettit."

"Is joke for another time," Robin said after calming down. "This has been really great, guys! Like really. But I gotta go and do chores and…stuff. So imma hafa ask you to kindly get out of my tent."

"Oh. Alright. Lemme just…" Gaius tried to get up, swayed, and fell off his chair. "Ooof!"

"Gaius? You good?"

"I'm…sleepy. Bubbles, gonna take a nap on your floor here. So nice and warm..." Gaius yawned. "Nighty night."

Robin blinked unevenly before shrugging. "Eh, whatever. I win. So, Gregor?"

"Yes?"

"Welcome abroad to the Shepherds!"

"Is good being here."

"Great! Well, stuff needs talking about. Later. Now, Imma leave you for stuff. Stuff needs doing. We should do this again sometime."

"Is Robin sure he's in good condition to be doing the stuff?"

"What? Oh yeah! Robin's *fine*! Robin is better than fine. Robin is great! Great enough to thing and stuff. See ya!" Robin somehow made his way to his tent's entrance, waved goodbye to Gregor and stumbled outside.

The tactician tried to remember what he was supposed to be doing. He was sure he had a list of the day's chores. However, he couldn't remember where he put that thing and didn't feel like going through all his coat pockets looking for a little piece of paper. So Robin relied on his instincts. He was sure they'd get him wherever he needed to be.

Robin was walking unsteadily for a minute before he bumped into something. When he looked down, he saw a hat.

"Oh, sorry Robin. Didn't see you there."

"Whoa…" the tactician stared. "A talking hat! Now I've seen everything!"

"Wha-? I'm not a talking hat!"

"You…you aren't?"

"No. Robin, it's me! Ricken."

"Huh?" Robin squinted and looked down. Sure enough, the hat was attached to a familiar head with a familiar body dressed in familiar robes. Robin's disappointment was indescribable. "Aw, I thought I found a talking hat…"

"It's just me. Sorry to disappoint."

"Yeah, well…" Robin spied a fancy box in Ricken's hands. "Wacha got there?"

"What? Oh, this. It's just some fancy tea for Maribelle."

"Tea?"

"Yep. Maribelle and I have been bonding over teatime. She keeps brining some fancy and exotic blends, I thought it was time I do the same."

"Whoa…that pretty extreme!"

"Huh?"

"You guys drink tea in the desert! You can't get more hardcore than that!"

"Oh, that. It's not as crazy as you make it sound. There's actually a perfectly good reason for drinking hot tea on a hot day."

"That still sounds crazy."

"Well, it's not. I read somewhere that it's a biology thing. I don't remember the exact details, but I think drinking hot tea signals your body to cool down via sweating. But you should ask Miriel about that. She can explain it better than me."

This was too much information for Robin's cloudy mind to process, so he chose to nod slowly. "Right. Well, good luck with that. Now off you go to learn about the life of the nobility from Maribelle and drink sweat."

"Robin, you *do* know that I'm also nobility, right? And we drink tea, not sweat."

"Yeah, sure. Whatever. No off you go!" Robin shooed Ricken away and tried to remember what he was supposed to be doing. Unfortunately, any coherent chain of thought he may have had was broken as another voice called his attention.

"Ah, Robin. Precisely the person I wanted to see."

"Wah?" the confused tactician turned to see the source of the voice. He saw yet another hat. Thankfully, he also saw that this one was attached to a person. A person he recognized. "Miriel? What can I do you for?"

"I have something for you," said the mage as she pushed something toward him. "Behold."

Robin just stared blankly. "Wha-?"

"It is the heater that I have created for you in order to increase the temperature in your tent and avoid freezing in Regna Ferox."

"But…we're in Plegia. Plegia is hot. Hot is the opposite of cold."

"Yes, it is. And with that in mind, I have altered my design slightly in order to add a cooling functionality. It works just the same, you need simply replace the fire time with a wind tome. This shall create a constant light breeze that shall ensure that you will not overheat when you are sitting in your tent."

"Miriel, are you a mind reader?" Robin asked in awe. "Because this is like, solving one of my biggest problems here!"

The mage adjusted her glasses. "Nothing so dramatic, I'm afraid. I am simply observant. And much like in Regna Ferox, it's not hard to miss your constant complaints about temperature. I thought this would be the most efficient method of addressing your complaints."

"That's pretty awesome! Wait a minute…" Robin swayed as he tried to remember something. "Weren't you doing something else before?"

"If you mean to inquire about my progress with Kellam, I'm afraid to report that it is frustratingly slow," Miriel furrowed her brows and shook her head. "I feel as if the answer escapes my grasp every time I make some progress. It is most infuriating."

"Oh. Well, can't you just…set him on fire or something?" Robin suggested. "I'm sure you can't ignore him then."

"That is an…interesting proposal. I have considered such methods but deemed them too risky. However, I can proceed if I have your approval."

"Sure! Whatever you need! I'm feeling in a really good mood right now. Do whateeeeever you need in pursuit of science. Just, you know, don't make him get dead or anything."

"I shall adhere to strict safety guidelines to minimize the chances of grievous injuries. You have my gratitude, Robin. Your

contributions to the world of science are commendable."

Robin smiled. "That's me! The patron saint of science! Now, d'you know where your subject is at?"

"I'm actually right here."

"Great!" Robin was so blitzed that he didn't even flinch when Kellam's disembodied voice appeared right behind him. "So, you heard the conversation. Now off you go! Light up. For science!"

"Um, Robin?" Kellam's voice sounded uncomfortable. "You're not actually going to let Miriel set me of fire, are you?"

"Hey, if it gets to the bottom of your disappearing act, why not? Besides, Miriel's not gonna let you die or anything, right?"

"That is correct," confirmed the mage. "By my estimates, the chances of something going horribly wrong are within acceptable limits. At worst, you shall experience third degree burns across some portions of your body. But we will endeavor to minimize this occurrence."

"Well that-"

"Less talking, more science!" snapped Robin. "Kellam, go forth and discover."

"Robin, I-"

"Go!"

"But-"

"GO!"

Robin was sure Kellam was going to protest some more, but then he heard a defeated sigh. "Miriel, please be gentle."

"I shall be nothing but. Now, let us be off."

Robin waved goodbye to the two (he assumed Kellam was there) before trying to organize his thoughts. The world was still spinning and he still felt great. The only problem was that his thoughts were racing in and out of his head at light speed and that made grasping one very difficult. However, Robin suddenly remembered something he was supposed to do today. The thought hit him like a lightning bolt and Robin made sure to set off before he forgot.

After what seemed like an indefinite time for him, Robin finally found himself at his target destination: the training grounds. And there, he saw the person he was looking for.

"Don-er. Crap. What the hell was his name again? Donald? Donson? Don…nel? Ha! Yes! Donnel!"

The boy quickly ran over. "Howdy Robin! What can I do ya fer?"

"Donny! My friend! Haven't seen you in forever! How goes the training?"

"Er, glad to see ya too, Robin. The trainin's been real swell. That Stahl's a real good mentor. I think I've finally mastered spear combat! Wanna see?"

"Not now. Lemme see that spear you got there."

"Sure thing."

Donnel hand Robin his steel spear. The tactician took it and examined it before tossing it away.

"Er, Robin? Whatcha do that fer?"

"Because fighting with spears on foot? That's for LOSERS!" the tactician said with such force that Donnel jumped back. "Only fools and horses fight with spears on foot! Real men use swords and/or axes!"

"But Robin, I've spent all the time I had trying to fight well with spears. I ain't got no knowledge about how to fight with swords or axes."

"And that's why I'm here. To give you…" Robin dug through his many coat pockets until he finally pulled out a book. "This."

"A book?"

"Yeah. A Second Seal. Hidden knowledge about…stuff and junk. For you, I want to read the section of swordfighters and mercenaries. Should teach you everything about…sword fighting. And mercenaries. Get Stahl to help train you and when you get the basics, go find Gregor. He'll mentor you more better. Got all that?"

Donnel looked at the book uncertainly. "Er, not to be questionin' you or yer tactics, but ain't it better I continue trainin' with the weapon I know instead of startin' with a brand new one in the middle of the campaign?"

Robin remained silent.

"Er, Robin?"

"ARE YOU QUESTIONING MY PLANS?!" boomed the tactician suddenly. "IT WAS I WHO HAS DIRECTED THIS WAR WITH NO CASUALTIES! IT WAS MY PLANS THAT GOT US THIS FAR AND THAT WILL BRING US VICTORY! MY PLANS ARE LIKE GREAT TACTICAL WINDS THAT SHALL SWEEP ALL BEFORE US LIKE...GREAT…TACTICAL…uh…WINDS!"

"Gah! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll get to studyin' this here book with all my free time! I'll be the best dang swordsman in the realm! Please calm down!"

"That's what I like to hear!" Robin smiled and patted Donnel on the back. "Now get to it!"

"Right away!" Donnel said quickly before scrambling off to find a practice sword.

Robin felt good. Something accomplished. And with something being accomplished, it was time for a break. He didn't know what he was doing or where he was going, but his feet kept moving and Robin stumbled drunkenly around camp until he found himself surrounded by trees. Robin was confused until he vaguely remembered that they made camp near a conveniently located oasis they found. That was nice.

Robin's thoughts were interrupted when he heard some sounds near him. Sounded like footsteps. Ordinarily, Robin would've immediately reached for his weapons and proceeded carefully. But with alcohol still in his blood, Robin simply approached the source of the sound with no care for his personal wellbeing whatsoever.

The first thing he saw was something…yellow? Blond? Robin thought it was hair. It took him a moment to properly identify what it was.

"Hey, if it isn't the Vaike!"

"Wha-!?" Vaike almost fell over trying to turn around. "Monkey meat, Robin! Don't you go off sneaking on a man like that!"

"Oh…sorry? Anyway, whatcha doing all the way out here?"

Vaike suddenly looked nervous. "Eh? Me? Up to? Nothin'! Har har! Yessir, just a whooole lot of nothin'. Oh, lookie there! Pretty flowers! I sure do love me a pretty flower, don't you? Yep! Love 'em. All of 'em! ...Say, what's your favorite flower, Robin?"

Even in his drunken state, Robin could see something was off. "…You're acting weird."

"Har har! Nope, not me! Just lookin' at all them pretty flowers is all. Nice, ain't they?"

"Liar. Y-you're trying to see who's bathing in that there spring."

"S-spring? There's a spring? Why, I had NO idea!"

"Don't play dumb with me, Vaike! I can even see some armor clothes over there. I think…Sumia's? And Cordelia too, judging from the red. Maybe Sully also?" Robin shook his head. "Whatever. Now stop leering and get back to camp."

"Aw, come on now!" Vaike tried another approach. "You're a man! You know how it is! Don't you ever-"

"No. I don't. And what's the big deal, anyway? It's just three women, bathing together, naked, and touching each other… and…and…" Robin's throat suddenly became dry.

Vaike smiled knowingly. "You're imaging it right now, ain't you?"

"Shhhh… it's a very pretty picture and you might scare it away."

"You know, the real thing's right over there. If we keep this a secret and sneak real quiet like, I'm sure we'll find somethin' we'll both like."

"Eh," Robin shrugged. "It ain't worth it. Knowing my luck, I'll just get attacked by a squirrel or something before seeing anything."

"Well, if you ain't gonna take a sneak peak, then you don't mind keeping quiet while the Vaike— Huh? What's that?"

"Buh?"

"It looks like…Sully's horse. Dang, it's looking something fierce. If I didn't know better, I'd say it thinks…uh-oh."

"What's the matter?"

Vaike suddenly bolted out of there. "IT'S GONNA CHARGE! RUN! RUN FOR YOUR LIIIIIIIFE!"

"Huh?"

Robin heard the sound of hooves and turned long enough to see a very angry looking horse charging toward him. After that…darkness. The last thing Robin remembered was thanking the gods that he was drunk. Otherwise, he would've been in a lot of pain. Alcohol saves the day yet again!

Chapter 19: Nowi

Real life gets in the way yet again. But nothing will stop the updates. NOTHING!

A big thank you for everyone who still with me and all who followed, faved and left comments. Comments did give me some ideas or two. As always, thanks to mileyzfan132 for doing the beta work. It's always appreciated.

Darkness. All Robin could see and feel around him was darkness. It was a strange yet familiar feeling. A familiarity that seemed to say that he had been in this exact situation before. Granted, he couldn't remember when this was as he was currently (as far as he could tell) floating in the darkness of unconsciousness. But it wasn't all bad. There was a sort of calm that came with it.

"Robin?"

A calm that came with not having to think about things or do anything. It was peaceful and serene. Hey, maybe this was what being dead was like! Just…a whole lot of nothingness and floating around. Feeling weightless. Keeping your thought processes to a minimum.

"Robin."

And you can just tune the world outside out. Whatever was happening outside, it wasn't your problem. You were just swimming in the darkness of unconsciousness while the world moved past. Enjoying the relaxation of doing nothing whatsoever. Not thinking, not worrying, just…nothing at all. It was nice…

"Roooobiiiiiiin. Are you dead? Say something if you're not dead."

…At least it would be if some annoying voices would just shut the hell up and leave you alone! What the hell? Could whoever was calling out to him not get the hint? Robin was unresponsive to his name being called. This clearly meant that he could either not hear or didn't care to respond to the person's calls. Clearly, the right thing to do is go away and wait until he woke up! Did people not follow the rules of common courtesy anymore?! Ohh, this got Robin incensed alright. Disturbing his peace and waking him from his otherwise pleasant state of being knocked out. As he regained his higher mental capacities, Robin was determined to give this person a piece of his mind!

As it turned out, giving someone a piece of your mind turned out to be a lot easier on paper. Robin discovered this as he was being unwelcomely dragged from unconsciousness. As he slowly got his bearings, he became aware of one thing: he had a horrible, ponding headache. As Robin slowly woke up, he groaned in pain. Gods! It felt like someone was repeatedly slamming his head with a sledgehammer. This was already a poor start to the day…

"Urgh, Robin isn't here at the moment, please leave a message after the tone. Beeeeeep."

"Hey, you're not dead!"

Robin groaned again. "No? Because it feels like I'm two steps away from it."

All the light wasn't helping his situation. Even with his eyes closed, the light was so bright that it was as if he was looking directly at the sun with his eyes wide open. That only increased the intensity of the headache. Robin didn't dare imagine what horrors awaited him if he actually did open his eyes. That was a scenario too terrifying to behold. What was important now was getting back into the darkness. Luckily for him, Robin had the perfect was to do so.

Blindly reaching around, Robin eventually found where his hood was. With great effort, he lifted his head up enough to get the hood up from under him and over his eyes. But with great effort come great rewards. And Robin's reward was a relaxing darkness covering his already closed eyes and easing his headache somewhat. It felt sooo good. Thank the gods that his coat had a nice, thick hood. Robin loved his coat. It was his favorite thing in the world. It had many pockets and was multipurpose in its usability! It was also the thing he wore when Chrom found him lying in that field. A connection to his past life, whatever he might have been there. In a way, it was part of his identity.

"Hey, why'd you do that?"

Oh. Right. The voice. It was still here and still talking to him. He still needed give it a piece of his mind…except that his mind was all slow and muddled. So maybe he'll just tell it to go way. All he had to do was plow through the pain and form words.

"Urgh…must…form…words…"

"What?"

"Light…bad…hurts…"

"Really? I always thought that the light was great. It always made me feel happy and energized! Not like the dark. Or the rain. Then I feel really sad."

"Go…away…"

"Aw, why?"

"Voice…not helping…at all…"

"Don't be like that! I'm here keeping you company. Hey, wanna play a game?"

Robin groaned. "Go…away…"

"I've never heard of that game. Oh, what about that eye game?! You know, the one where you spy with your little eye? I'm really good at that one! Let's start. I spy with my little eye…"

"Urgh…why won't you go away?"

"Can't."

"…Why not?"

"I've been told not to."

Robin groaned again. "Are you sure I'm not dead?"

"Pretty much. Why?"

"Because this is what I'd imagine hell would be like."

"Really? It seems pretty nice here. A bit hot, but nice."

"Not that!" snapped Robin. "I mean this whole not sleeping and you not letting me sleep despite me really wanting to do nothing but sleep. Urgh, my head still hurts…are so sure you're not some kind of demon or something?"

"Nope!" said the voice cheerily. "Just a dragon."

"…What?"

"Oh yeah, I'm a dragon. Did I not mention that?"

"Great. So I am dead."

"What? No you aren't."

"Oh yeah? Then why am I being slowly tortured by a dragon? One that – strangely enough – sounds like someone who just recently hit puberty?"

"Wha-? Hey! I'm not torturing you and I *didn't* just hit puberty! I'm a thousand years old!"

"Urgh," Robin tried to cover his ears. "Why all the yelling? And why you sound like a little girl?"

"Well, us manaketes age a lot slower than you humans. So I look way younger than a human would. Well, a thousand year old human would probably be just dust, so I'm in waaay better shape."

Robin's mind couldn't even process half of that sentence. "…You just said a bunch of things which don't remotely make sense."

"Huh? Like what? Seemed pretty straightforward to me."

"Urgh…whatever. Why can't you leave me alone? I feel like I'm dying and I'd like to do that in peace."

"Are you always so dramatic? And I can't leave you alone. I've been tasked with watching over you so that's what I'm

doing."

Robin turned and lay face down on the bed. "I'm sure they won't mind if you leave me be. After all, I'm asking you to."

"No can do. You're stuck with me until the healers come back and you get all better! In the meantime, why don't we play a game?"

"No."

"Aww, why not?"

"Because games require effort. Effort is bad. Resting is good. We rest."

"But resting's boooring!" complained the voice. "We have to have fun. Games are fun. Let's play a game!"

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Pleeease?"

"No."

"Pleeeeeeeeeeease?"

"Fine."

"Plee-wait, really?"

"No."

"Aw, come on! Pleeeeeee-"

"Fine."

"Yippee!"

"But we play my game by my rules."

"Okay!"

"And you have to promise to follow the rules and not complain."

"Gotcha."

"You promise?"

"Promise! Got my pinky ready and everything!"

"What does that hav-never mind. The game is as follows…"

"Yeah? Yeah?" the voice asked eagerly.

"Hold on, my mind suddenly ground to a halt. Thought process currently experiencing turbulence, please stand by…"

"Are you okay?"

"…"

"Hey."

"…"

"Hey!"

"Ow! No need to yell, I'm right here."

"Sorry. I thought you blanked out on me there. You alright?"

"Peachy," Robin deadpanned. "Now, where was I?"

"You were gonna tell me about a game we're gonna play."

"What? Oh, right. The game is called 'Let's sit quietly together for as long as we can and not make any sounds whatsoever' and the rules are that whoever makes the first sound loses. You ready?"

"…What kind of game is that? It doesn't sound fun at all!"

"Tough nuggets. I never said it was fun. I said some stuff and you promised to listen to my rules. Don't go off breaking your promise on me."

"Hmph," the voice huffed. "Fine."

"Good. The game officially starts now. Remember the first one that makes any noise loses. Go."

"…"

Robin internally sighed in relief. This was what he wanted for the past…few minutes or so. Peace and quiet. And how peaceful the quiet was! Robin could actually make out some of his thoughts and the headache seemed to be less severe. This felt so nice. Robin felt as if he could drift off into a nice and deep sleep soon enough…

This blissful state of peaceful silence lasted no more than a minute.

"Okay, I lose. Now let's play hand puppets!"

Robin sighed in irritation. "I'm not going to get any peace from you, am I?"

"Not until the healers give you the all clear!" said the voice merrily.

Figures. Those damn dragons. Keeping him awake and torturing him. It was bad enough that he had to fight them and their riders during the day and they sometimes came to terrify him in his dreams at night, but now they talked and didn't let him sleep! When would this ever end? Well, technically Robin fought - and had nightmares about - wyverns, but they were essentially dragons. The only difference was they didn't have arms and didn't breathe fire. Which, Robin would not know what he would've done if they actually did breathe fire. That might be the end of him as a tactician. Wait a minute…

"What kind of dragon are you?"

"Huh?"

"You heard me. What kind of dragon are you? Please don't say wyvern. Please, please, please don't be a wyvern…"

"I dunno where you got such a funny idea from. I'm not a wyvern."

"Oh thank gods. If you're not a wyvern, then what in the world are you?"

"I told you already, I'm a manakete."

"A what? What kind of foreign dragon thing are you? And why can you talk? And why haven't you eaten me yet?"

"Woah there, that's a lotta questions you're asking me. I don't think I'm any more foreign than you or anyone else. And I'm not a 'thing'! Why can I talk? Why can you talk? Talking is normal. And I don't eat people. Especially not my friends!"

Robin groaned. Still too much information to process all at once and too many things swimming in his mind. Robin just grabbed the first thing that whizzed past. "We're friends?"

"Yep! I'd like to think so. Why? You don't wanna be friends?"

"I don't…know. Why are we friends?"

"Because I'll be hanging around you guys for a while. I thought I'd make friends and play around and just generally have fun. Duh!" the voice said this as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

If Robin wasn't lying down, he would've shook his head. "Who gave you permission to stick around and why are we letting a child hang around us, anyway?"

"Hey, I'm *not* a child!" the voice said indignantly. "I'm probably older than all of you. Combined! Besides, you have a bunch of people who can be called 'children' in your army. What about them?"

"I...guess you have a point there…" Robin conceded grudgingly. Being proven wrong by a child, (Robin refused to believe the nonsense about being a thousand years old) this was not one of his finer moments. "But whatever. You sound younger than Ricken and Donnel combined. What can you possibly do to help us?"

"Did you miss the part about me being a dragon? Do I have to say that again? I'm a DRAGON!"

"Yeah…you totally don't sound like a dragon."

"What? What do you know. Have you ever heard what a dragon sounds like?"

"No," admitted Robin. "But I'd imagine they'd have great, deep voices. They probably wouldn't sound like little girls."

"You know, if you'd just take that stupid hood off and look, you'd know that you're wrong."

"Oh no, I'm not risking the massive headache that'll result from the light just to take a glance at you. I hear your voice and that's enough for me to make my judgement."

"You're scared."

"Am not! I'm just being rational and looking after my own wellbeing."

"You're totally scared! Of the sun or whatever!"

"I told you that's not it! What I am doing is-"

"Bwak bwak bwak. If you don't know, that's the sound you make. Because you're a chicken."

Robin growled. He really needed to work on himself. He never really took being baited well. What was worse was that he totally fell for such tricks and was powerless to stop himself despite being aware of what the other person was doing!

"Fine. Fine! I'll endure personal pain just to prove you wrong. Then I shall laugh in your face. Laugh I say!

And with that, Robin first gathered his energy and turned himself onto his back. That was the easy part. Thus preparing himself, Robin pulled back his hood and slowly, painfully peeled his eyes open.

It was an agonizing procedure. The more he opened his eyes, the worse his headache got. But damn it Robin was going to push through and prove this little obnoxious voice wrong! Laughing in her face was what urged Robin on.

What he first saw was a bright blob of light. Eventually, that blob cleared and Robin could make out a few details here and there. Then, Robin made out a smiling face.

"Heya!"

"Ah-HA! I KNEW IT!"

The face jumped back. "Wha-? What? Knew what?"

"You!" Robin exclaimed and pointed. "A dragon. Pfft, you're no dragon! You're just a little girl! I don't even know why I believed you. 'Dragon' my behind. I would laugh except I think my head would crack if I did so. So I'm going to let you imagine me laughing at you."

"Hey!" the girl said irritably. "You wait until I transform. You ain't seen nothing yet!"

"Oh? I suppose after transforming you're going to roll out?"

"What? No. I'm gonna make you eat all those mean things you said. Tada!" the girl pulled out a stone.

Robin stared blankly. "What am I looking at?"

"This is a dragonstone. I can use it to transform into a great big dragon!"

"Yeah, right. People transforming with fancy rocks. What will you crazy kids think up next?"

"I told you I'm not a kid!" the girl huffed indignantly. "Besides, why is this so hard for you to believe? You already have

someone like her here."

"Oh yeah? Who?"

"The rabbit lady. What was here name? Pan? Pot? Peanut?"

"…"

Robin mentally cursed. For the second time that day, he was being outsmarted by a child. What the hell was wrong with him? He was definability having an off day or something.

"What's that? Got nothing to say?" the girl asked triumphantly.

"No, it's just that-" Robin began to say when his vision cleared and he made out more details about her. "Whoa there, what are you wearing?"

"Huh?"

"Your clothes. Don't you think that's a bit inappropriate for someone your age?"

"My clothes?" Robin's guest looked down at herself. "There's nothing wrong with them. And I dress like I wanna dress like. I'm not dressing like a granny just because you say so!"

"Your clothes may be risqué even for the beach. Can't you pull that cape around yourself of something? If you walk around with us like that, people will get ideas. Wrong ideas. Bad, wrong ideas."

"Ideas like what?" the girl asked curiously. "Eh, it doesn't matter. If they give us funny looks I'll just transform and scare the pants off them! And besides, it's really, really hot out here! You can't expect me to put on coats and sweaters. Look at you, wearing that thing. You're sweating like some…big…sweater!"

"Am not. All this is just me…ejecting water to…cool myself…off?"

"Sounds a lot like sweating to me."

Damn it. That made this the third time this kid outmaneuvered him! This stupid kid was a lot smarter than Robin gave her credit for. Or she was just toying with him. Whatever the case, talking to her was not going to get him anywhere and he needed to get rid of her before she made his headache any worse…

"So you wanna see me transform and make you believe or what?"

…Too late. Gods, if there was one thing that Robin was learning about himself was that he hated kids. Well, certain types of kids. Ricken and Donnel were kids but the former wanted to be treated as an adult and tried to act accordingly while the latter was surprisingly mature. Even Maribelle adheres to manners and decorum as they are "the cornerstones of a noblewoman's character"…or something of that nature. It was kids like Lissa that drove him nuts. Kids with too much energy and cheer that they don't know what to do with and ended up stuffing frogs down the shirt of the closest tactician in the vicinity. That, or talked to him despite his many objections. It looked like this girl was in that category too. What was wrong with kids today? Robin blamed all those sugary treats they're always (probably) eating. Then again, Gauis practically runs on sugar and he's a mellow fellow (heh).

So…bleh. All this thinking was making Robin's head hurt more than it already was. He didn't even start thinking about how this girl got into camp or who let her stay (although Robin had a good guess). No matter, he would yell at Chrom later.

"No. Let's just say I believe you're a dragon and all the other things you said that make no sense."

"Really? Alright! Nowi wins again!"

"Right, well…Nowi, was it? Welcome aboard, blah blah blah, stuff, war, paperwork later, everything later, please leave me to rest."

The girl now known as Nowi pouted. "That didn't sound very enthusiastic or sincere. Chrom's welcome speech was better."

"Was Chrom incapacitated when he gave you your welcome speech?"

"No."

"Then this is what you get. Now, to borrow a phrase from Lon'qu's book, 'leave me be!'"

"Man, you're really grumpy when you're hurt."

"Being hurt does tend to bum me out a bit," Robin said sarcastically. "But seriously, how many times do I have to ask you to leave me alone before you leave me alone?"

Nowi shrugged. "I dunno. Probably as many times as it takes until the healers come and tell me I'm not needed here."

"And how long until *that* happens?"

Nowi shrugged again. "How should I now? I'm no healer. Could be five minutes, could be five hours."

Robin groaned and covered his face with his hands.

"Hey, don't be like that!" Nowi approached and patted the tactician on the shoulder sympathetically. "That means we have more time to play together!"

Robin groaned longer and louder. "What did I do to deserve this…?"

"I'm no nurse, but I heard that-"

Thankfully, a voice called her out before Nowi could go on and give her unprofessional assessment of whatever was wrong with Robin.

After a moment, he heard her voice again. "Well, looks like my job here's done. Looking to play with you once you're all better. Bye!"

Robin silently thanked each and every god he knew. Finally, now that he was alone, maybe he could get some more shuteye that he so desperately crav-

"Oh, Robin!"

Damn it! Why was it that a man could not get some sleep when it was the only thing he wanted to do that day?! It is as though the gods were playing some horrible, cruel and unusual joke on him by sending all these people that he needed to talk to. Well, technically he didn't *need* to talk to them. But straight up telling them to leave would be rude, and Robin was not going to be rude to his friends. But on the other hand, he really still needed to get some damn sleep and hopefully rid himself of this hangover.

…Well, looks like being rude it is. Now all Robin had to do was kindly (or not so kindly) tell whoever this new person was to leave him the hell alone. And unlike Nowi, maybe this person would get the clue and not need to be asked multiple times.

"I'm so happy you're awake! You really had us worried for a bit."

"Wait a minute…Sumia? Is that you?"

"It sure is."

Crap. So much for that plan. Ordinarily, Robin didn't like to be rude to his friends on even a bad day, but there was something about Sumia that made him especially unable to resist her. Maybe it was because she was always so nice to him, maybe it was because he really enjoyed the time they spent together, or maybe because he got a really funny, pleasant feeling deep down whenever he spent time with her.

Whatever the reason, Robin found himself always making time for her, regardless of his plans for the day and his condition. Today was no exception. Oh well. Robin supposed he would just tough it out. He went through worse; it was doable, if unpleasant.

"So," the tactician said tiredly. "What brings you to my humble abode in the healing tent? I think that's where I am, right?"

"That's right. And I recently thought about ways I could contribute more to the Shepherds. After thinking about it, I decided to help the healers. Although I can't heal myself, I can still help by bringing bandages, potions and things like that. So I thought I would start today."

"So, you're like, the assistant nurse?"

"Huh. I suppose I am."

Robin quickly opened one eye to glance around the tent. "I would congratulate you on expanding your horizons, but unfortunately I'm your only patient today."

"Oh that's alright! You're actually the reason I chose to start today."

"Oh?"

"You're my friend, Robin. When I heard you were hurt, I just felt like I had to do this. It's the least I can do after all those times you've been there for me."

"When you put it like that, it almost makes me glad that I got put here in the first place," chuckled Robin. "So for your grand debut as a nurse, I'm your first patient? Alright then. I put myself in your hands, Nurse Sumia."

Sumia giggled. "Relax and leave everything to me!"

"Really? Everything?" Robin smiled mischievously. "Does that mean you'll give me a nice, intimate sponge bath?"

Although Sumia was getting used to Robin's teasing, it still didn't stop her from blushing furiously.

"R-Robin! Please don't suggest such things, especially so loudly! What if someone were to hear and get the wrong idea? This is my first day as an assistant nurse, please don't embarrass me."

The tactician laughed softly. "Alright, I'm sorry. It's just that I can't miss an opportunity when presented with one. All in good fun and that."

"Yes, I know. Although I didn't say I was *entirely* against the idea…"

"Hmm? Did you say something?"

"What? Oh, nothing! Nothing whatsoever. Now then, let's try to make you feel better."

"I'm all about the feeling better."

"Alright, the first thing we need to do is cool you off. Now, if you'll just let me take off your coat, we can get started."

Robin immediately crossed his hands across his body and clung to his coat protectively. "Sorry Sumia, but no can do."

"What? Why not?"

"Because it'll be a cold day in hell before I willingly part with my beloved coat. The only times my coat isn't on my person is when I sleep and when I bathe. Otherwise, it's on me all the time. No exceptions."

"Robin, you're being silly. Your coat will be right here, next to you. I just need to take it off so that you don't overheat."

"I'm not overheating," Robin said despite suddenly noticing the increasing wetness of his shirt. "I'm totally fine. My shirt just…hydrates."

"Your shirt…hydrates?" Sumia asked skeptically.

"That it does. It's…uh, the latest fashion trend from Anna. Yes. That's right. So no need to relieve me of my coat and stuff."

"Robin?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you so reluctant to take off your coat?"

"Because the coat is the only thing I have from my previous life. It was what I was wearing when Chrom found me and is the only thing that makes me feel…unique. Without it, I might as well be some sort of vagabond or something. No ties, no family, no nothing. But at least I can cling to my coat to remember who I am. Since I'm the only one who has this sort of coat, I feel like it's what makes me, well, *me*. It means a lot to me, silly as that sounds."

"Robin, I had no idea that it meant so much to you…"

"It does. Besides, who knows? This coat could be the source of my tactical prowess! If you deprive me of it, you could be

depriving us of our greatest advantage! And I think that neither of us want to deprive us of my tactical skills. I guess what I'm saying is that I'm not taking off my coat."

Sumia stared at the tactician before smiling and sighing in both amusement and exaggeration. "Alright, I see how committed you are to your coat. Let's see if we can find another way to cool you off."

"Alright…" Robin said absentmindedly as he lay back down and covered his face with his arm. He still felt a bit drowsy.

Sumia popped outside. "I found this little contraption in your tent. Based on the few notes on it, it should cool you off nicely. Here it…urgh…is…" Sumia grunted as she pushed Miriel's adjusted heater into the tent. "Whew! This thing is heavier than it looks!"

"Do you need me to show you how to work it?"

"Oh no, you just lay there and leave everything to me! You still need to rest and get all better."

"Rest sounds nice…" yawned Robin.

"And you can do so with a nice breeze! Based on the notes on this thing, it shouldn't be too hard to operate. Let's see…" Sumia got out a piece of paper. "Miriel's handwriting is so neat. Hmm, seems easy enough. Now, the first thing I need to do is get a power source. It says that a thunder tome should do, so…"

Sumia reached into her bag and got out two tomes. "…Put the thunder one down in this little compartment…there! And the wind one goes in the middle here…done! Prepare to be cool like you've never been cooled before!"

"Alright…"

"All I have to do is turn this on. Oh, I'm so excited! I even went and used one of the fancy looking tomes on your desk. Let's see how well it cools."

"Great. Let's indeed do that…" Robin mumbled before his mind kicked in and his eyes shot open. "Wait, Sumia? Did you say that you took one of the new tomes off my desk?"

"Yep! I figured a new tome would cool better than a used one. Now, let's see how well Miriel's cooler works, shall we?"

"Wait! Sumia, don't-!"

"Here we go!"

But it was too late. The pegasus knight already activated Miriel's cooler. And as soon as she did, a huge burst of wind shot out of it and blew everything in front of it. Unfortunately, this also included beds and people lying in said beds.

Robin yelled in surprise as he was suddenly and forcefully lifted into the air and blown away. He then grunted in pain as he hit something hard behind him and was effectively "pinned" to whatever he hit a moment ago.

"ACK! Sumia! Turn it off! Turn it off!"

"I'm trying! I'm trying!" Sumia cried frantically as she pulled levers and tried to open compartments containing the tomes. When all that failed, the pegasus knight kicked the cooler in a last ditch attempt to try and halt the airflow.

That seemed to do something as the cooler sputtered and gradually ground to a halt. However, before Sumia could sigh in relief, the cooler let off a few sparks and exploded. Sumia coughed and waved her hands to clear the smoke. She then saw that the bottom half the cooler was still in one piece, while the top half was completely blown off. In the middle, the wind tome she placed glowed with power.

"Wha-? OOF!"

Sumia was so happy that she found a way to shut down the cooler that she totally forgot about Robin's predicament. As it was, the powerful gust was the only thing keeping him pinned and not being blown away further into the desert. With the wind gone, there was nothing keeping him from falling down. And the Robin did indeed fall and hit the ground with a hard "thud".

"Oh gods, Robin!" Sumia immediately ran and kneeled next to the prone tactician. "Robin? Robin! Are you alright?! Please answer me!"

"Urgh….Sumia?" Robin groaned and slowly opened his eyes. "I heard…something blowing up. Are…urgh…you alright?"

"Don't you worry about me, worry about you! Gods, are you alright?"

"Not gonna lie Sumia, I've been better," winced the tactician. "I hadn't realized how hurt my body was until this moment in time. I thought the headache was bad…"

"Gods Robin, I'm so sorry!"

"It's…urgh…alright. It wasn't your fault…"

"Yes it was!" Sumia's sudden outburst made Robin open his eyes and look up at her. He was alarmed to see the she was crying. "It was all my fault! I-I just wanted t-to do something to help you! T-to finally give a little back. B-but I can't even do that right. I'm so s-sorry for being useless! I'm sorry I can't do a-anything right! I-I…"

"Sumia, Sumia! Look at me."

The pegasus knight rubbed her eyes and reluctantly looked at Robin.

"Sumia," the tactician began seriously. "I say this as both your friend and your commanding officer. You are not useless and you can too do things right."

"B-but-"

"No buts! It's the truth. Do I have to remind you how essential you are on the battlefield? Because you are! You're one of my most valuable soldiers in every engagement!"

"B-but that's because I'm one of your only fliers, n-not because I can actually do anything…" Sumia said sadly and looked down.

"Well, that's partly true, but not quite! You forget that I've been fighting with you since pretty much the beginning…almost. I have watched you go from a green rookie knight to one of the best soldiers we have. You lance with the best of them and handle your pegasus like a pro. Do you know that my spell casting accuracy has gradually increased the longer we fought together? Because it has! And you know why? Because you've gotten better as a pegasus knight with every sortie."

Sumia blinked a few tears away. "R-really?"

"Really, truly and honestly. Whether it's with me or Frederick, you always perform well. It's especially true since we entered the Plegian desert. Remember how fast you ferried me from place to place in our last battle? That was key. And it's not just your battlefield prowess that makes you so important to us. It may not seem like it, but the things you do around camp all help keep us be the best that we can be."

"But I don't even do that much…"

"That's right. You do *more*. Do you realize how much it helps us that someone is doing mundane chores that no one else wants to do? Laundry, dishes and stuff? It's the little things that also matter. In fact, they matter as much as the actual battles because clean clothes and dishes are the keys to victory! Oh, and food. But I think I already made clear my admiration for your cooking…I've done that, right?"

That comment actually made Sumia smile a little. "Yes, Robin. M-many times, in fact. But I'm grateful all the same."

"And I am grateful for the fact that you made such good baked…uh, goods. And on top of your contributions on a general level, you help me on a personal level too."

"I…do?"

"That you do. Aside from the cooking and the pies, our weekly book club meetings are what I look forward to more than anything. It's a fun little way for us to relax and forget about this whole ugly war. There, it's just us, our books, and our enjoyment of books. It's…nice."

"It is, isn't it?"

"It is," Robin smiled, reached out and gently wiped away some tears from Sumia's face. "You're not useless Sumia. You mean a lot to us and to me. So please don't cry, alright?"

"R-Robin, I…" Sumia sniffed and wiped away her remaining tears. "Thank you. It seems you always know exactly what to say when I'm down."

"I'm your friend. It's what we do.

"It's just…" Sumia sighed. "You do so much for me. I just wish I could help you as much in return…"

Robin clasped Suima's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "You don't need to worry about that, Sumia. You do enough for me as it is. Enough and more."

"Robin…"

The tactician smiled warmly before closing his eyes. However, a question suddenly floated to the forefront of his mind. Robin briefly opened his eyes and was immediately confused.

"Uh, Sumia?"

"Yes?"

"Where are we? Why are there trees in the medical tent?"

"Oh, that's because we set up the tent it that oasis we found," explained the pegasus knight. "We figured that it would be uncomfortable for the injured to lie in the desert heat, so we put cots and tent walls in the shade under the trees. Granted, it was a lot more orderly before that little accident. What happened? Why did it suddenly burst with such winds?"

"Oh, right. You took one of the newer looking tomes off my desk, right?"

"Was I not supposed to?"

"Ordinarily, that wouldn't be a problem. But I recently purchased a bunch of Arcwind tomes from Anna. The shipment probably arrived today. I would've placed it accordingly but I was…otherwise indisposed. But that's okay!" Robin added quickly. "The tomes are all the same color so it's easy to get mixed up!"

Sumia chuckled. "You don't have to try so hard to cheer me up, Robin. I'm not going to burst into tears again."

"Oh. Well that's good."

Robin would never really let Sumia know, but crying women scared and perplexed him to levels unimaginable. He never knew what to do when a woman suddenly started crying in front of him. Granted, encountering crying women was thankfully an extraordinarily rare event in Robin's life, but it did happen. And when it did happen, he had absolutely no clue what to do. Robin excelled in battlefield tactics, report management and paperwork with jokes on the side. Emotional comfort? That might as well be another language. What the hell was he supposed to say? Being near a crying woman put Robin on the spot. And unlike on the battlefield, Robin's mind usually panicked and went through a thousand ideas a second trying to find something appropriate to say. And that usually resulted in Robin totally shutting down and becoming a dumb, panicky mess with a high chance of saying something totally inappropriate. Truth be told, Robin wasn't even sure how he managed to navigate through this mess. It took all his concentration, willpower and empathy to keep himself together, *not* freak, and calm Sumia down. How did that even happen? Robin must've reached into some deep, compassionate and emotionally on the ball part of himself to not only keep himself cool, but also tell Sumia things in such a way that didn't make him sound like an inconsiderate jerkbag. It was odd, Robin knew everything he said was true, that much was for sure. It was just that Robin never really expected an opportunity to actually convey all of that in a coherent manner. But here they both were, him on the ground and her kneeling beside him, *not* crying. Aside from the pain in his body, it wasn't all bad.

Robin opened his eyes slightly and glanced up. Sumia smiled back gently and was absentmindedly stroking his hair. Yeah, it definitely wasn't all bad.

Robin couldn't really put his finger on it, but as he lay there, looking up at Sumia, he felt *something* inside him shift, change. Being with her suddenly brought him a feeling of…peace? Or something like it. Robin felt an indescribable (but pleasant) feeling spread through his chest, easing his pain like a healing salve. It was…nice.

Apparently, they gazed at each other for longer than was necessary, as Sumia seemed to realize when her face became red and she turned away. Robin was a bit sad, he thought they were having "a moment" there, whatever that meant. It definitely felt like "a moment", or something of that nature. Then again, staring at other people for extended periods of time was creepy. Robin was definitely *not* creepy and certainly didn't want Sumia to think he was. Great, now he was feeling embarrassed.

For whatever reason, Sumia seemed a bit nervous. "U-um, Robin? C-can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

Sumia fidgeted. "I-well, u-um…"

Before she could continue, she was interrupted by the sound of another person entering the tent (or what remained of it).

"Robin, I heard you're awake and brought you…some…what in Naga's name happened here?"

"Cordelia!" Sumia bolted upright. "Robin, look who's here! It's Codelia! Hi Cordelia! Nothing was happening between us here!"

"Uh…" The red haired pegasus knight blinked in confusion. "I…never said there was. I was referring to why half the tent is blown away."

"Oh, that. Well, uh…"

"We had a technical malfunction," Robin intervened helpfully. "But everything's fine and no one got hurt too badly."

Cordelia was about to ask many more questions before she saw Miriel's broken cooler still puffing out clouds of smoke. She then saw Sumia's guilty face and Robin's pointed expression. That's when everything clicked into place.

Clearing her throat, Cordelia decided it was best to proceed and not risk embarrassing Sumia by asking more questions on the matter. "Right, well. Robin, I heard your voice from outside the tent. I assumed that you were awake and on your way to recovering."

"On my way, yes. Not so much now. Before, all I was aware of was my headache. Now I'm aware that my whole body hurts. And that's on top of the headache! Urgh…this is a terrible start to the day…"

"Oh, that won't do! It's probably because you're lying on the hard ground. Here, why don't you let me help get you onto a bed?" Sumia asked as she tried helping Robin get up.

"Ow. Owowowowowow!" Robin winced and leaned on Sumia for support. "Dammit, everything still hurts."

"Let me help," Cordelia rushed opposite Sumia and helped support Robin. "There we are. Now, let's slowly get you to this bed. And carefully lie you down…"

Finally lying down on a soft bed, Robin sighed in relief. "Soft bed is so much better than hard ground. So doc, when am I getting better?"

"…Oh! Me?" It took a few seconds for Sumia to realize that Robin was talking to her. "Er, right. Well, the healers said that while your injuries were quite severe, you should make a full recovery by the afternoon. You just need to rest and limit how much you do."

"Alright then…" Robin was about to relax when he suddenly remembered where they were and what they were doing. "Wait! What about the campaign against Plegia?! Where are we? How long was I out? Are we still on track to rescue Emmeryn? Are-Urgh!" Robin grunted as pain shot through his body.

"Robin! You're still weak and you have to save your strength! If you don't your wounds won't properly heal," Sumia warned as she tried to look over Robin's injuries and where he hurt. "You must take it easy to be out by the time the healers said."

"And please don't concern yourself with the details of the war," Cordelia added as she gently but firmly pushed the tactician down on the bed. "We are still in the Plegian desert, you were unconscious since yesterday afternoon and everything is going according to schedule. We are advancing on where Gangrel is going to execute Emmeryn and all know the roles that you have assigned us during the last strategy meeting."

Having calmed himself down somewhat, Robin still didn't look convinced. "I was out for a whole half day?! How careless and shameful. Think of all the reports we could've gotten in that time! Reports and updates, all sitting on my desk… unsorted. I-I have to see them!"

"Robin, no!" Cordelia said firmly and pushed the tactician down again. "What you need to do is listen to the healers and rest. Everything else is taken care of."

"It is"?

"Yes. You hired a secretary for a reason, remember? I have read and organized all new reports and updates. There is

nothing new to report."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Not even a little bit?"

"No."

"Robin, Cordelia has everything covered. Maybe now you can focus on getting better?" Sumia asked hopefully. She deflated when the tactician fidgeted uncomfortably. "…No?"

"Well…maybe. That is, if I can ask you two for a favor."

"Of course."

"Certainly."

"If I may be so bold, can…" Robin cleared his throat. "Can I have one report? Just one! It doesn't even have to be long! I just need *something* to look over. Please?"

Cordelia and Sumia both exchanged confused glances.

"Why?" asked the red haired pegasus knight. "The situation is no different from yesterday. Do you not believe me?"

"What? No! Of course I believe you, my bestest secretary ever! It's just that, as a tactician, I'm used to doing certain things at certain times. This includes reading reports in the morning. Not following this routine makes me feel…weird. Bad weird, like I put on my shoes on the wrong feet or something."

"I…" Cordelia looked to Sumia who just shrugged. "Very well. If it means that much to you, I'll get you the latest report. But just the one."

"Thanks, Cordelia. I really appreciate you putting order and routine back into my life."

"I didn't know you even had a routine. You seem more the type to do what you want on a whim," Cordelia remarked as she was leaving.

"Routine is the thing that brings order to the chaos that is our everyday lives!" Robin shouted after the leaving pegasus knight. Once she was gone, he lay on his bed and closed his eyes. "Gods I hate being confined to the medical tent. Nothing to do…"

"Oh! Why don't I bring you some books?" Sumia suggested. "Our book club meeting is still a few days off but that doesn't mean we can't read up and compare notes, right?"

"That works. Great idea, Sumia!"

"Alright, don't go anywhere. I'll be back in a jiffy!" Sumia said excitedly and ran out of the tent. Robin wasn't too surprised when he heard her yelp in surprise and a thud outside. But it didn't seem to dent her excitement as she didn't even dwell on her tripping.

As he lay there in silence, Robin suddenly noticed how nice it was. He was lying on a nice(ish) bed, under the trees and with a light desert breeze blowing through. And it was so quiet! Somehow, all the excitement of the past few minutes managed to distract him enough to not notice his headache, but with nothing more to do, it came back. But the silence helped. It was so peaceful…

"Looks like he's awake."

"Told ya! Looks like you owe ol' Teach a gold coin!"

…And now it wasn't. Oh well. Robin thought he really shouldn't be surprised. It seemed that whenever he wanted to do something or wished for something to happen, fate decreed that the exact opposite occurred. Sometimes (often), Robin cursed his luck, or lack thereof.

"Chrom, Vaike," greeted the tactician, "What brings you over here?"

"Well," began Chrom. "We *were* going to see how our resident tactician was doing, but now I'm more curious to find out what in Naga's name happened here."

"Yeah, it looks like this here tent's been hit by a hurricane!" added Vaike.

Robin shrugged. "Long story. Involves the misuse of an Arcwind tome. Anyway, nice of you two to visit me. Hey, can any of you tell me what happened to me yesterday? It seems that I've been hurt pretty bad but I can't remember how this happened."

"Really?" asked Chrom. "That's rather surprising. I would've thought that you'd remember being trampled over by a horse."

Robin blinked. "I was what?"

"Yeah. Apparently you tripped in the oasis and startled Sully's horse, who proceeded to run you over. At least that's what Vaike said happened after he found you. Right Vaike?"

"Uh, y-yeah! Totally! Of course, The Vaike doesn't really know *exactly* what happened. Teach just came along way later and stumbled upon our friend on the ground. Yep."

Robin closed his eyes and groaned. "Of all the injuries I sustained, battle or otherwise, this has probably got to be the most embarrassing yet. I get things shot at me, spells cast and attacked by enemy soldiers on a regular basis and am fine. But when a horse runs over me, I'm knocked out and need immediate medical attention. Embarrassing."

Chrom laughed and patted Robin on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I'm sure we've all been there."

"Are you telling me that you've also been trampled by a horse and sustained injuries that put you in the medical tent overnight?"

"Well, maybe not *there*, but we all have our share of embarrassing stories and how we wound up in the healing tent. Yours isn't that bad."

"Really? What's your most embarrassing injury off the battlefield?"

"Nice try. Now, why don't you rest a bit while I take whatever this thing is," Chrom pointed to the still smoking cooler. "And properly dispose of it. Then we can talk about how you're feeling."

"I'm not going anywhere…"

"Hey, Robin?" Vaike said quietly after Chrom left. "Thanks for playing along with my cover story. It wouldn't work if only one of us stuck to it."

The tactician stared blankly. "…What are you even talking about?"

"You know! With our little embarrassing episode yesterday? I came up with a cool little cover story that totally makes sense. Teach's really quick on his feet like that. Let's just stick with that and pretend what really happened yesterday never happened, yeah?"

"What exactly *did* happen to me yesterday?"

"What? Are you kiddin' me?" Vaike asked incredulously before he paused and his eyes lit up in realization. Slowly, a smile spread across his face. "Oooh, I see what you're playin' at. Good, good. That's what I like to hear! The blank expression really sells it! You're real pal, you know that? So the official line's that whatever happened yesterday didn't happen, right?"

"What didn't happen?"

Vaike winked. "Exactly! I owe you one, Robin."

"Uh…"

Before Robin could make a coherent reply or even understand what the hell Vaike was talking about, Chrom returned.

"There. Now that thing's smoking underneath a sand dune. Problem solved. Now Robin, how are you?"

"I hurt all over. But the good news is that I should be out of here by midday. That's not going to be a problem, is it?"

Chrom shook his head. "Not at all. We're making good progress through the desert despite the tough circumstances. At least we don't see many Plegian guards any more. That makes our advance easier. Robin, you shouldn't worry so much. We'll make it."

"Huh. All things considered, that's what I should be telling you right now. You seem to be calm, despite everything that's happening."

Chrom frowned. "I admit that the circumstances could be better, but I have absolute faith in you and the Shepherds. Things have been going our way so far and you have steered us through many victories. I have no doubts that this time will be no different. After all, we also march with the Feroxi soldiers at our side. With all these odds in our favor, there is no way we can lose!"

"Yeah! Tell it as it is!" chimed in Vaike.

"Wow, I'm touched that you have so much faith in me…"Robin said sincerely. "Alright! I'll now do my best to heal faster and get the hell out of here so I can do what I do best!"

"That's the spirit! But don't try *too* hard, okay? We wouldn't want you to strain yourself trying to get better."

"There ain't no such thing!" laughed Vaike. "You just gotta tough it out and force yourself to get better. Mind over matter and all that stuff! Words of wisdom from the one and only Vaike!"

Chrom rolled his eyes. "Riiight, let's just leave Robin to heal at his own pace before 'Teach's' advice gets him with an embarrassing groin injury and a funny story to tell."

"Wha-?" Vaike became flustered. "I thought we agreed never to talk about that again!"

"Oh?" Robin's interest was piqued. "I gotta hear this."

"Well," began Chrom. "It all started when-"

"Argh! Chrom, that's not 'never talking about it ever again'!" Vaike exclaimed before pushing his friend out. "Hahaha, nothin' to hear about, Robin. Get well soon. See ya!"

Robin found himself alone again. Clearly there was an embarrassing and hilarious story there. He made a mental note to pursue it at a later time.

"I'm back," Robin looked and saw Cordelia standing before him. "And I have a gift for you!"

The tactician eagerly took the few papers she handed to him and sighed in relief. "So…good. Having a report on me. Everything is fine in the world again. Thanks, Cordelia. You have no idea how much this means to me."

"Of course. After your impassioned speech about routine, how could I not fetch at least one report for you?"

"You're a real lifesaver, Cordelia. I feel the healing kicking in already!"

The pegasus knight simply laughed. Robin's wacky antics always made her smile.

"I'm back!" Sumia's voice interrupted what any of them were going to say next. "And I brought back some books that we didn't get to finish last time. Oh, hi Cordelia. Want to join us in our impromptu book club meeting?"

"I…" Cordelia hesitated and looked at Robin. The tactician gave an encouraging smile. "I suppose I don't have anything I should be doing at the moment."

"Great! Now we can pick up where we left off. It was just getting to the good part when we had to stop and I'm just dying to hear what you guys think!" Sumia said happily as she handed books to Robin and Cordelia.

Perhaps this being run over by a horse wasn't so bad after all. At least now Robin had some company and something to do, as opposed to just lying there with nothing to do. Granted, Suima visited him last time, but last time it was also kinda her fault he ended up there in the first place. Robin supposed it helped that he was only going to be in here for a few hours. So he might as well enjoy his time and get to some stimulating and thought provoking discussion on books.

"So, what do you think about Eliza's prospects and her potential suitors?"

Of course, Robin now remembered what his issue with the book club was and why he talked to Chrom about it. Holding a copy of *Power and Preconceptions*, Robin unfortunately remembered everything involving the melodrama and various

love triangles in their most recent romance novel. Gods, he really had to change what he read. Maybe after they were all done with this rescue mission, he could use Chrom and finally move onto literary genres that weren't romance.